

PIKE HISTORY

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*A Look at
Pittsfield's Southside*



The Southwest side of the Pittsfield Square in the early 1990s.

Going

The South Side of Pittsfield's Square has an Interesting History

South

By Bill Beard

The history of the south side of the public square in Pittsfield should really begin with how Pittsfield came to be. After Pike County was whittled down to its present size in 1825, it was decided that the county seat needed to be more centrally located. At that time Atlas served as the county seat. A commission made up of George Hinman, Hawkins Judd, and Benjamin Barney purchased the land from the U.S. Government in March of 1833 at a cost of \$200. Col. William Ross provided the funds to buy the land, and was given the honor of naming the new county seat, and he chose the name Pittsfield after his hometown of Pittsfield, Massachusetts.

Streets were laid out in a grid pattern, and town lots were put up for sale in May of 1833, with some lots reserved for public purposes, such as cemeteries and a public square. The public square at this time was a hilly prairie covered in hazel brush. The vision of streets looked good on paper, but they were not immediately created in the town's early stages, so the public square was not blocked off but remained an open field. A lot was chosen to build the county's new courthouse,

and this two-story frame building on the north side of the public square was among the first structures built in Pittsfield in 1833. While the north side saw a few businesses begin, the south side developed during this time as homesteads for early town pioneers.



Pittsfield pioneer William Watson

Among those pioneers was William Watson, who is considered the first settler of Pittsfield. Watson was born in 1798 in Pennsylvania, moved to Missouri in 1818, and in 1833 came to Pittsfield,

where he built a small shanty on the site of the public square. A year or two later he built a home south of the current Watson hotel, and opened a small store which he ran from his home.

In 1838, Watson opened up the Mansion House hotel on the south side. Watson's hotel at that time was two-stories tall and half the size it is now. The hotel's construction coincided with the building of Pittsfield's second courthouse in the center of the public square. This two-story brick and stone courthouse replaced the old wooden two-story structure on the north side. It was no coincidence that Watson built the Mansion House at the time he did, as lawyers, businessmen and other citizens coming to the growing community to conduct court business would need a place to stay. Business was good for William Watson, who built a two-story brick home on West Washington street sometime between 1838 and 1843. Watson owned the Mansion House for 14 years, selling it to Joel Pennington around 1852. He also sold his West Washington home some time before this to lawyer Milton Hay. Milton Hay's nephew was John Hay, who would go

on to serve as one of President Abraham Lincoln's private secretaries. John Hay stayed with his Uncle Milton while he attended the Thompson Academy in Pittsfield in 1852.



Nancy M. Heath

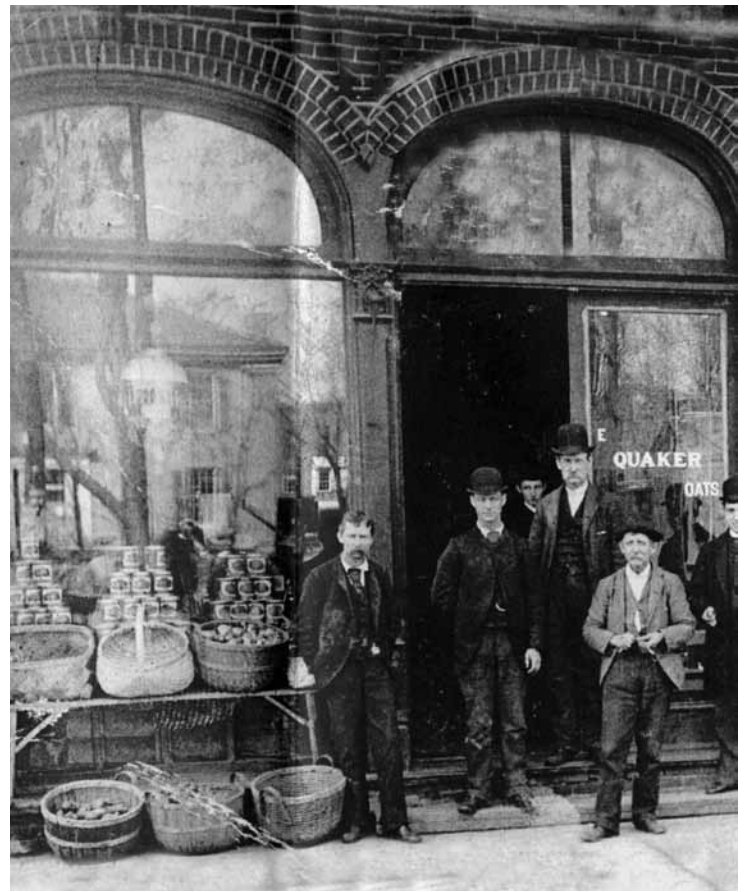
Besides William Watson, another early settler of the south side was Mrs. Nancy M. Heath. Nancy Heath came to Pittsfield in 1834 as a widow with six children. She rented a small log house that stood east of the current Watson Hotel. In the winter of 1834, Nancy conducted the first school in Pittsfield from this log house. She had 14 students who each paid her \$3 for 12 weeks of schooling. William Watson's son was among the students. Mrs. Heath was

born in 1791 in Cincinnati, Ohio, and was considered the first white child born in that city. She was an honored member of this community in her older years, and passed away in 1880 at the age of 89.

Next to Nancy Heath's house, towards the east, stood the blacksmith shop of Frank Spencer, and beyond that remained opened pasture towards the corner of Monroe and Washington. This was around 1840, and the Pittsfield square was finally taking shape. By 1847, two new hotels were located on the south side, but they didn't have the staying power of the Mansion House. On the eastern corner of the south side, where the empty lot now is, was the California House, also known at one time as the National House. R.L. Harper, a dealer in harnesses, trunks, leather and hides, had a shop in this hotel, and later on it was the site of Strubinger's saloon. At the southwest corner, where Ideal Hardware now stands, was the Pittsfield Hotel, made partly of logs, which was opened by Henry Miller in September of 1846. This hotel was also later known as the Kentucky House. There was a large stable attached to this hotel. Next to the Mansion House, on the corner where Pike County Optical is today, was L. L. Talcott & Co., a leading merchant for Pittsfield at the time and also the town banker. S. Barker, a tailor and ready-made clothing merchant, also had a business on the southside, east of the alley.

Lucius Lord Talcott eventually moved to the north side of the square sometime during the late 1840s, and William Watson & Son took over the corner on Madison and Washington. This location would be a general store for several years, and would change hands quite often, as would many of the businesses on the square. It's hard to pinpoint exactly when a lot of these transactions took place, and businesses would frequently play hopscotch all around the public square, sometimes making it difficult to assign where their true location was.

In 1851, John Webb came to Pittsfield and operated a general store on the northside of the square, where Farmers State Bank's drive thru is today. Later on, Webb built a two story brick building, which stood east of the alley on the south side of the



The Bush Building, some time after the Civil War. Notice the reflection of the courthouse in the window to the left. This courthouse was torn down in 1893.

square, to house his general store and pork packing business. Mr. Webb came to Pike County with the Daniel Shinn family in 1820 at the age of 6. He spent his early years working as a clerk in Pleasant Vale township, as a lumberman at Florence, and then in 1839 found himself at New Canton where he was a merchandiser and farmer. Webb worked in Pittsfield for 23 years, retiring to a farm he owned in Newburg township. The Webb building was eventually added to further east

towards Monroe Street, and maintained a consistent, two-story look along the southeast side. A livery stable opened up at the far east end, and the National House Hotel ceased to be. The general store of Adams & Burt took over the spot where the Kentucky House stood on the southwest corner.

In 1865, the First National Bank was chartered, and started its business on the west side of the square, where the Clothing Center use to be. The bank rented the space from Col. William Ross, who had had the first banking house in the county, Ross & Company, at that location

since 1855. The first board of directors of the new bank was a who's who of important businessmen in Pittsfield: Chauncey L. Higbee, Michael J. Noyes, William R. Wills, Daniel Hicks, Austin Barber, Nathan Wells and Buddle Atkinson. The bank decided to move to a new location, and a building committee purchased from John Webb his property on the southside of

In the winter of 1834, Nancy (Heath) conducted the first school in Pittsfield...She had 14 students who each paid her \$3 for 12 weeks of schooling.

Quick Histories of the Southside



The First National Bank Building was rebuilt in 1910 to resemble a classic Greek facade. It was torn down and remodeled in 1964 to incorporate a drive-thru.

The Mansion House remained a hotel up until the mid-1970s, when it was then converted to apartments. It was revived as a hotel in 2007, and re-named the Watson Hotel, after its original founder, William Watson.



The Bowl became a popular bar and bowling alley for Pittsfield during the 1950s and 1960s. It was built in what used to be a livery stable. When a small fire broke out there in 1966, firemen remarked on the old wooden beams and could identify the horse stalls.



The Clark Theatre was originally the KP Opera House. When movies became popular in the late 1920s, the opera house was bought by Clark Armentrout, who renovated the building for a movie theatre.



The Bush Block today. The third-story was torn down in the late 1960s.

the square. First National Bank moved to this location, two doors east of the alley on the south side, in 1866. Meanwhile, William Watson & Son sold their general store on the corner to Richard Scanland, who was married to Watson's daughter. Joel Pennington was now proprietor of the Mansion House, and immediately east of there was the shop of E.A. Graham and R.A. Coulter, coffin makers and undertakers.

In 1865, James Merrick Bush took over the Pike County Democrat from Milton Abbott. The Civil War had just come to an end, and Abbott, who had a controversial and bitter feud with the Republican newspaper during the war, decided to head out West to Oregon. Bush moved the newspaper from its offices on the northside of the square to his new Bush Block, a three-story building that he built west of the alley on the south side. I'm not for certain of when it was constructed, but I'm guessing it was sometime between 1866 and 1870. The newspaper's offices were on the second floor of the building. On the first floor was a grocery on one side and a billiards parlor on the other, and in the middle of the first floor was a grand staircase that led to the upper floors. The third floor was a large hall for special occasions and meetings. Lawyers and doctors would fill in the remaining locations on the second floor.

The Southside was now set in how it would structurally look for the next forty years, from 1870 until 1910. Businesses would come and go, much like they would in every decade that followed. Here are how the businesses lined up on the south side in 1880, beginning on the southwest corner going east. Seeley, Loyd & Co. had their hardware store in a new two-story building. They had been in place just east of the alley on the southside, next to the First National Bank. John Boyd was now the grocer where Scanland had his general store in the Peckinpaugh building on the corner. The Mansion House remained owned in 1882 by Captain Johnson from Milton, with a Mr. Curry as a barber in one of the first-floor rooms. Henry Kientzle, Sr. had his boots and shoe store just east of the Mansion House, replacing the Graham and Coulter undertakers. Next was George Siegle's Centennial Drug store. In the Bush block was K. Tracy's Harness shop, and upstairs was the real estate office of Hooper & Smith. across the grand staircase was Tippetts & Rhea, a billiard hall, with a dry goods store owned by I. B. Krabiell. The Pike County Democrat offices were upstairs. Past the alley was A. D. Graves & Son, clothiers, then the First National Bank. Carrie Kean had a millinery store, and then there was a restaurant

owned by A. Kerner. George Edwards maintained a livery barn, and finally Frank Strubinger's saloon was on the corner. Opposite the saloon was the family home of Col. Daniel "Dick" Gilmer. Gilmer was killed in the Civil War at Chickamauga in 1863, and given the commission of Colonel for his bravery during the battle. He is buried in Oakwood cemetery.



The J.C. Davis and Son Meat Market, in the Bush Block, circa 1900.

As the years went by, the south side of the square reflected the progress of the times. In 1894, the old courthouse that stood for nearly 56 years was torn down, and the new courthouse that we see today was completed in 1895. Also in 1894, construction began on the new K.P. opera house, owned by Clayton Kibler. The dirt from excavating the opera house, located south of the Mansion House, was used to grade around the new courthouse. In 1896, on the second floor of the Webb building just east of the alley on the south side, Ed Glandon set up the switchboards for his new telephone company, Pike County Telephone. At the start, Glandon's business had 40 subscribers, by 1907 he had 160 subscribers. There were four switchboard operators in those early days. Behind the building, telephone poles began carrying the wires out in all directions within Pittsfield, and beyond. Electricity was already in place in many

locations by then, and electrical lights hung in the middle of intersections on all corners of the square. Perry Allen was now in possession of the southside livery barn, and John Schlangen along with a Mr. Geisendorfer owned the saloon next door to the east, while the Chicagoan Restaurant owned by S.N. Jones, was to the west. In 1898, J.C. Davis and Son opened up their meat market in the Bush Block, and in 1900, C.A. Coley opened a drug store that also sold wallpaper and paints in the former location of Siegle's drug store, next door to the Davis meat market. Burr Swan bought the KP Opera House from Clayton Kibler, and began showing picture shows there.

In 1898, the Strausses bought he Mansion House, and the hotel would see a rebirth in a way during the early 1900s, as people began to take to the roads in automobiles, and needed a place to stay along the way. The automobile

changed many things about the square in the early 1900s. Perry Allen's Livery barn, which stood on the southeast end of this block, was slowly becoming a relic of times gone by. In 1915, the livery barn, which was owned at the time by the Strausses, was sold and remodeled for Pittsfield hardware store. Carrie Kean's millinery moved from it's location west of the old livery barn to the east side of the square. An automobile garage on the southside of

the square ran by W.D. Troutner was readied for expansion in 1915, with both a north and south entrance to be built by John Siegle. I'm assuming this was located in part of the old livery barn, probably the easternmost section of that building. Between 1909 and 1910, the First National Bank moved a door to the east and rebuilt. The new two-story bank building had four columns and resembled a classical greek facade. It was built by contractor E.O. Murphy at a cost of \$25,940. Taking its place in the old bank's building was Ben Matthews and Vinton King's Dodge and Oldsmobile sales room. In 1917, Burr Swan sold the KP Opera House to Clarence Oakley, who continued showing movie shows. My great great uncle George Beard was the movie projectionist under both Burr Swan and Clarence Oakley. ☞

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A Look at the Historic East School Building

The following information appeared in a booklet for the 1978 Rededication of the Historic East School Building.

Drawing of the East School from the 1860s The first public school, as we know it today, was built in the northeast part of Pittsfield (Present Historic East School). Planning was started in 1861 and construction was started in September 1863. Those involved in the planning and construction were: Col. William Ross, J.M. Bush, and William A. Grimshaw.

It was built by John Houston of Griggsville. The contract price was \$35,000. Bonds were sold and ran for 10 years at 10%. It was built of stone and brick. The stone was brought from Joliet down the Illinois river. The bricks were “burned” on Monroe Street.

At the time of its completion (1866) the East School was one of the finest and largest buildings of its kind in the state and it “fulfilled the requirements of a modern school plant.” In it were located the grade and high schools.

It contained eight large rooms and each room was identical, each having a recitation room and closet. ON the third floor was situated the gymnasium. A large double stairway connected the first and second floors. Large stone steps approached the building from the north and south, leading under heavy stone archways and two doors were at each of the east and west entrances. The windows are all arched stone. A large clock is mounted in the tower in the center of the roof. The clock and bell were donated by Col. Ross.

The following story

of the completion of the East School appeared in the Pike County Democrat, June 28, 1866:

“We have the pleasure of laying before our readers an engraving of the beautiful school house, which has recently been built in the Pittsfield school district, at a cost, when fully completed and furnished, of about \$45,000. Pike

County, of which Pittsfield is the county seat, was by census of 1860, the eleventh county in population in the state.


“The area of the territory comprising the Pittsfield school district is two and a half miles square and was established by an act of the legislature at its session of 1860-61.

It is composed of parts of Pittsfield and Newburg townships, and contains taxable property, in real estate alone estimated at the value of \$1,000,000.

“By the original act and subsequent acts amendatory thereof, the control of all school matters in the district, is vested in a Board of five directors, who are elected annually by the voters of the district, there being elected at the same time, an Assessor for said district.

Shortly after the passage of the act creating the district, measures were set on foot for the erection of a schoolhouse that could afford accommodations for all the children in the district; this education to be free to every scholar residing in the district, and in which should be taught not only the branches of a common English education, but those taught in the highest academies of the land.

“Money was raised for the building during the year 1862, but work did not commence until September 1863. The plan of the building, as it now stands, was designed by the distinguished architect, Mr. J.M. VanOsdel of Chicago, who furnished an estimate of its cost, at prices of materials and labor then ruling. Owing, however, to the rise in the cost of everything, its cost was exceeded by more than one third of the amount then fixed. The building is now complete, with the exception of the steps.

“We have thus given a running sketch of the building of which our citizens claim right to be justly proud. It was commenced at a time when our national affairs looked dark and gloomy, and notwithstanding its cost has far exceed the amount contemplated at the outset, the project has been steadily prosecuted to a successful conclusion. 

At the time of its completion (1866) the East School was one of the finest and largest buildings of its kind in the state.





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If you are able to assist us, please check the box or boxes that apply:

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Pittsfield, IL 62363

The Pike County Historical Society Museum



The Historic East School Building, home of the Pike County Historical Society Museum.

The Pike County Historical Society Museum showcases many items related to Pike County's past. This four-room collection highlights items from Pike's formative years, as well as antiques and collectibles donated to the Society.

Agriculture has always been an important aspect of Pike County, and we have items representing Pike's farming history, including a seed plow and wagon. Local businesses are also represented with special items highlighting their own history.

Many famous individuals are associated with Pike County, including Abraham Lincoln, Stephen Douglas, John Nicolay, John Hay, and Free Frank McWorter. Items connected to these 19th century figures are presented within the museum.

The museum has on display a pair of Robert Earl Hughes' overalls. Regarded as the heaviest man who walked the Earth, Hughes was a resident of Fishhook and is buried not far from this small hamlet in Northern Pike County.



Dental office display in the Northeast room.



Overalls and belt of former Pike Countian Robert Earl Hughes.



Items displayed in the Southwest room include furniture and township histories.



A wagon stands in the Northwest room.

and the Historic Shastid House and Homestead

The Shastid House was renovated in 2006 and restored to how it would have looked in the 1830s. The house is a part of the Pike County Historical Society's property and a part of the museum tour. The following is some background regarding the Shastid house:

John G. Shastid moved his family to Pittsfield in 1836 from New Salem, where he had been a neighbor of Abraham Lincoln. Pittsfield was the county seat, yet there were only six houses there at the time. John bought one of them. Finding the house too small for his family, he built this larger white frame house in the same yard in 1838. John was a farmer who had but three months of formal schooling. Yet he was literate and valued book learning. His grandson recalled that he knew almost the whole New Testament and Fox's Book of Martyrs by heart.

John was a man of few words. So it made a deep impression on the family when, on hearing that President Lincoln had been shot, he gathered them about him to utter a deeply felt six syllable prayer pleading for Lincoln's life. Later that day, when a boisterous young man loudly exclaimed his satisfaction that "Old Lincoln is dead," the sixty-seven-year-old Shastid knocked him to the ground in one solid punch that rendered him senseless.



The historic Shastid house.



Abraham Lincoln slept in this bed, on display in the Shastid house.



The original log beams are reinforced with new beams in the Shastid house roof.

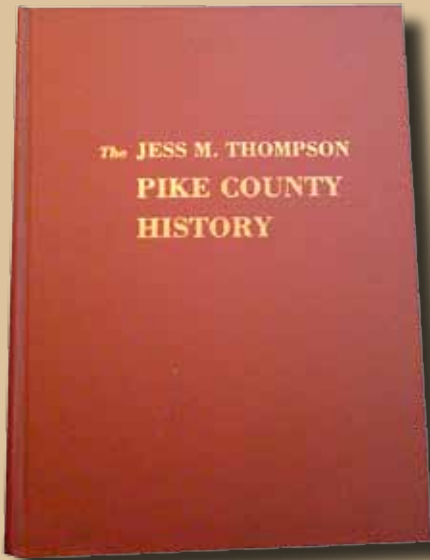


The fireplace was where the family gathered every night.



The kitchen area of the Shastid house.

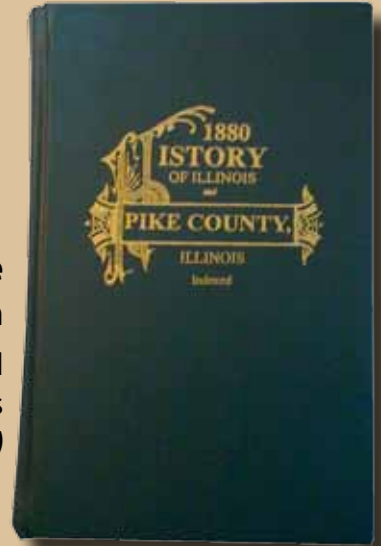
Capture Pike History with these publications from the Pike County Historical Society



Pike County History by Jess Thompson

Stories of the county from its beginning.

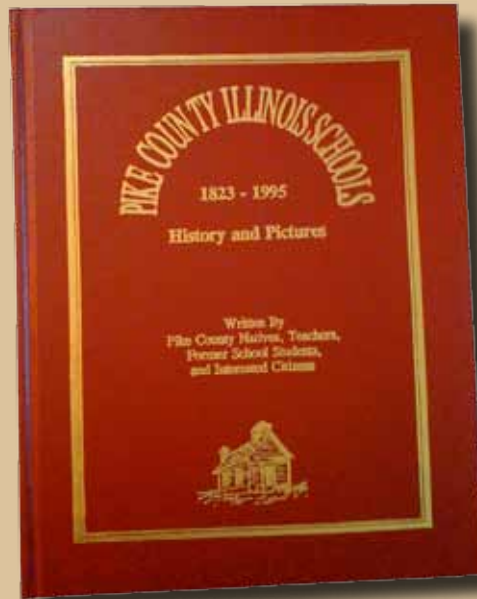
\$40.00 (by mail \$45.00)



1880 History of Pike County by C. Chapman

Includes biographical sketches of early settlers

\$60.00 (by mail \$65.00)



Pike County Illinois Schools

Rural/town schools with many photos of buildings and students.

\$40.00 (by mail \$45.00)



PIKE COUNTY
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Books and other Pike County items available at Casteels and the Pike County Historical Society Museum, both in Pittsfield. Make checks payable to the Pike County Historical Society.

Pike County Historical Society - P.O. Box 44 - Pittsfield, IL 62363