

SURVEY AREA

5. HISTORIC CONTEXT

Summary

Plainfield had a pivotal role in the early settlement and development of this region of Illinois. This early period perhaps arguably remains the most significant period in the village's development, and merits the greatest attention when looking at the village's history. What is particularly interesting about this development is that an astonishing portion of it may still be seen in the village's extant built environment. Both the quality and quantity, especially from the early period of development, c. 1830 - c. 1855, combine for a striking representation in Plainfield's remaining historic resources, the degree to which could be of statewide significance. Architecturally, the Greek Revival and Gothic Revival styles, and the Upright and Wing vernacular building type date to this period; additionally, some Gabled Ell vernacular building types are also from this period.

Early Settlement

When Illinois achieved statehood in 1818, much of the area north of Alton and Edwardsville (in Madison County, along the Mississippi River and east) in the new state, with some exception, was a wilderness.² However, occasional explorers, soldiers on their marches to the distant outposts, as well as American Indian traders and trappers, had given glowing descriptions of the beauties of this region.³ The Illinois and Michigan Canal project had been conceived during the War of 1812, thus prompting the purchase of the American Indian lands in 1816. Important to note is that American Indians remained in this area as late as 1835-37, and some never left; thus the earliest Anglo European settlement of some ten years or more meant the coexistence of the two distinctly different cultures.

As early as 1820, an occasional pioneer had explored out into the new Northwest lands, including early Methodist missionaries.⁴ One of these early Methodist missionaries was Reverend Jesse Walker, whose journey to this area pre-dates statehood. Walker, was born in 1766 in Virginia, joined the church at age twenty, and entered the ministry on probation in 1804. In 1806, Walker was accompanied by William McKendree on a trip to this region, then part of the Territory of Indiana. Upon their return back east, the men were appointed to the circuit in Illinois, eventually heading back to Illinois. McKendree College, established in Lebanon, Illinois in 1828 and named after Walker's colleague, remains the oldest college in the state, so both men made significant contributions to the historic development of Illinois.

Purportedly a French Canadian, Vetel Vermette, came to the area in 1825 (although some accounts suggest his arrival as early as 1796),⁵ thus rivaling Reverend Walker as the first Anglo-European settler in the area, but the details of Vermette's tenure in the area are rather sketchy. According to *Plainfield: Then and Now*, Reuben Flagg stated that when he arrived in the area in 1830, he found Vetel Vermette living "here with an Indian wife."⁶ Vermette, a fur trader, evidently did not remain in the area for long; he sold his claim to Jedediah Woolley, Sr., and left.⁷ Another account, also in *Plainfield: Then and Now*, has Vermette stopping through the area as early as 1822 or 1823, then returning in 1825 to establish squatter's rights.⁸ This account has Vermette marrying Huldah

Walker, daughter of Dr. David Walker of Ottawa, and relocating to Ottawa in 1830. However, George Forquier (sometimes spelled Fouquier, Furque, or Furkee), the son of a Potawatomi Indian woman and a French Canadian man, was also in the area during the same period as Vermette, and may have been in the area even earlier than Vermette.

Reverend Walker returned to settle in the Illinois lands with his family, including his wife and two daughters, all on horseback with few possessions in tow. In 1826, Walker came to the vicinity of Plainfield, where an American Indian village continued to exist for several more years.⁹ In 1827, Walker became Superintendent of the Fox River Mission, which encompassed a large extent of the territory. In 1829, he was in charge of the Des Plaines Mission, and formed the first class at Walkers' Grove, where the first settlement was made, just south of the present village of Plainfield.¹⁰ Reverend Walker's tenure overlapped somewhat with that of Reverend Stephen R. Beggs, one of the earliest itinerants through the region. Beggs settled with his family in a log cabin on the southeast portion of Section 16 in the township, at the southeast corner of what is now Fort Beggs Drive and James Street. After the initiation of the Black Hawk War in the summer of 1833, the cabin of Reverend Beggs was selected as a temporary fortification at which area settlers gathered for protection. Realistically the "fort" was no more than Beggs's log cabin surrounded with barricades constructed of fence rails and logs from outbuildings.¹¹

Reverend Walker died in 1835 at age sixty-nine. His manuscripts were lost to fire. Some had been at the house of James Walker (Reverend Walker's son-in-law); those which were saved from that fire, were destroyed in a fire at the D.C Searles house several years later. Much of the account of Walker was conveyed from Mrs. D.C. (Harriet) Searles, his granddaughter, and James Walker, the father of Mrs. Searles.¹² Accounts vary as to the relationship between the two Walkers; for many years the Walkers were thought not to have been related, other than through marriage, despite the name. However, recent genealogical records indicate that a relation may have existed, with the two men possibly being cousins.¹³ Captain James Walker was a native of Tennessee. He had met Reverend Walker in Ottawa and eventually accompanied him on his mission to Walkers' Grove. Jesse Walker gained the title of "Captain" on June 25, 1832 when he was made Captain of Illinois Volunteers, part of a system of volunteer militia which had been organized from Chicago to Ottawa.¹⁴ Accounts differ as to whether the name "Walkers' Grove" pertained to Reverend Jesse Walker or to Captain James Walker; perhaps more accurately, the reference would be "Walkers' Grove" to reflect the residency of both early settlers. James Walker brought along a horse-powered mill which he set up for temporary use, then constructed a sawmill and a grist mill also along the Du Page River by 1832, providing important early services to settlers in the region. When the Walker Sawmill was established, no other sawmill existed in northeastern Illinois, with the closest mill at St. Joseph, Indiana. However, by 1833, numerous sawmills were operating throughout the region.¹⁵ Reportedly, the lumber for the first two frame buildings in Chicago was hewn at this mill.¹⁶ One building was erected by P.F.W. Peck on the southeast corner of LaSalle and South Water streets.¹⁷ The other building, the Dole Forwarding House, was erected by George Dole.¹⁸ Upon the formal organization of Will County, James Walker was chosen to be one of the three first commissioners, without opposition, and later represented the county in the state legislature.¹⁹ (Will County had originally

been part of Cook County, until it was separated off in the winter of 1835-36.) James Walker also served as county commissioner from 1845-48. He died in 1850 at the age of fifty-seven.²⁰

Another of the earliest settlers was Reuben Flagg, who left Vermont with his family in the spring of 1830, ending up in the vicinity of Walkers' Grove; he settled on the northeast quarter of Section 10 in the township, after first claiming a tract in the northeastern quarter of Section 20.²¹ Accounts indicate that at that time, the village which became Plainfield included about a dozen log cabins, a block-house, and a stockade. It was surrounded by low, wet prairie, barren sand, and impassable sloughs.²² Flagg's daughter may have been the first Anglo European child born in Will County, but accounts vary.

The area which became Plainfield was within the Indian Boundary, a section of the state which was framed by two parallel lines traversing diagonally across the townships in what would eventually become part of Will County. The twenty mile strip of land which was framed by the Boundary (Native American lands purchased by treaty), was surveyed in 1821-22 for canal purposes, following statehood for Illinois in 1818. The land lying outside of the Boundary was not surveyed until 1837-38. The earlier survey meant those lands were among the first available for purchase.

Chester Ingersoll is credited with platting the village proper in 1834, which had sometimes been called South Plainfield, and was laid out in a grid. The north division was laid out by Squire Arnold, with Main and Oak streets running diagonally. Ingersoll, on his 1834 plat of the new town, christened the village as "Planefield," which was changed to "Plainfield" on the plat of his first addition to the original town the following year. The name was apparently inspired by the lush table of prairie grass and abundant wild flowers which lined the DuPage River, all surrounded by virgin timber land.

The community, however, was already well established by the time of the platting in 1834. James Walker's log house, the first in what would become the village proper, easily pre-dated the platting of the village, but Ingersoll's house was constructed shortly thereafter. James Walker's house was located on the northwest corner of Fox River and Ottawa streets; he had also constructed the first community house in northern Illinois, but the date of this is not clear.²³ It was located on the corner of 401 Division Street.²⁴ At this time, Paul Kingston built a cabin and store/house which were located just west of the cemetery. The store offered such staples as axes, augers, coffee, sugar, tea, blankets, and calicoes.²⁵ Canal records indicate that in 1830, Paul Kingston of Walkers' Grove bought Lot 7, Block 20 for \$27.00; James Walker bought Lot 4, Block 10 for \$20.00; and Jedediah Wooley bought Lot 9, Block 44 for \$50.00.²⁶ By 1832, James Walker's mill had been established on the DuPage River, a short distance below the point where the River Road crosses the river, about a mile south of the village; Walker had paid Reuben Flagg \$32.00 for digging the mill race.²⁷ Still other houses were quick to follow, with Plainfield and the surrounding communities using all the lumber that Walker's mill could produce.

Plainfield House, also known as Halfway House or Wight House, was built in 1834, with the first incarnation being a one and one-half story building constructed as a tavern for Squire Arnold. (The original section exists within the structure of the current building.) It also became the first government franchised post office in what eventually became Will County, with James Walker serving as the first postmaster.²⁸ The location of the building—half way between Chicago and Ottawa, on the Chicago and Ottawa Trail (later Main Street)—was ideal. The Dr. John Temple Stage Line, later the Frink and Walker Stage Line and the Hinton Stage Line, used Halfway House from 1834 - 1852. In 1836, Dr. Erastus G. Wight of Naperville leased Arnold's Tavern and some adjoining property; but *Plainfield Then and Now* also states that Squire Arnold continued to keep the post office at Halfway House until his death in 1845, so the information seems contradictory.²⁹ Dr. Wight enlarged the building to its present configuration circa 1836 - 38 with lumber hewn at James Walker's saw mill.³⁰ The first floor of the house consisted of the tavern, dining room, and kitchen; sleeping rooms were on the second floor, but two fireplaces in the attic meant that was usable space available for sleeping also. Purportedly, a ballroom was also on the second story.³¹ Wight had "Plainfield House" painted on the east side of the building, but the establishment became popularly known as "Halfway House" or "Wight Tavern."³² A large horse barn was located west of Halfway House, providing space for the stage line horses.

Dr. Wight, like many others who settled in Plainfield at this time, was from the east—Philadelphia. Wight was reportedly the first practicing physician in northern Illinois, traveling a circuit from Plainfield to Bourbonnais Grove to Chicago Heights, back through Western Springs and occasionally across the state to Rock Island.³³ In 1838, Wight built a two story frame drug store across from Halfway House on Main Street; the exact location is unknown, but it is thought to have been where the apartment building is now, at the northeast corner of Main and Illinois streets. He continued his practice until his death in 1845 and the family continued to operate the inn as late as 1886. The building was a focal point of activity for the region, as a hotel, tavern, and post office; a number of the 1834-35 Cook-Will County land grants were also administered at Halfway House, as well as being a favorite meeting place for the pioneer Methodist circuit riders.³⁴ The building also served as militia headquarters and artillery park for the Plainfield Light Artillery and Union Greys.

Plainfield's significant location on the early road system was crucial to the village's success as a regional draw. The Chicago and Ottawa Trail is the basis for Main Street/Route 126. Dr. John C. Temple of Chicago received a United States mail contract in 1833 for a seventy mile route between Chicago and Ottawa with Arnold's Tavern (later Halfway House) at 503 Main Street becoming a regular stop, half way between the two destinations. The practical use of trails was facilitated by the state legislature, when a law allowing the construction of plank roads was passed in 1849. Prior to this time, the early roads were bottomless dirt roads which in wet weather became impassable at times. The construction of plank roads meant grading the dirt and laying wooden stringers beneath wood planks, for a sturdier, drier road about eight feet in width. The Oswego & Indiana Plank Road Company formed in 1849, opening to traffic in December 1851. Fee for a round trip to Joliet was twenty-seven cents. The road terminated in Plainfield; it closed in March of 1869.³⁵ The failure was substantially due to the fee system; farmers would drive miles out of the way in good weather to avoid

paying the toll.³⁶ A second tollhouse was located at the northeast corner of Lockport Street and Wood Farm Road (Old Van Dyke), but was destroyed largely by the 1990 tornado and eventually razed.³⁷ Currently, Joliet Road/Route 30, reflects this early trail. A plank road toll gate was located on the northeast corner of what is now Renwick Road and Route 30. The Lockport, Plainfield & Yorkville Plank Road Company was formed in 1855, and was located along Lockport Street. It was never completed to Yorkville.³⁸

The location on popular trails meant an increased need for accommodations. Root Kent's house on the east side of DesPlaines just south of Lockport Street, was purchased by Jim Beggs in 1865 and turned into a hotel. The house had been built in 1845. Beggs operated the hotel for about twenty-five years. Supposedly the south section of the building had been the Chittenden Store which had been located at the corner of Division and Commercial streets, then moved and connected to the hotel to enlarge the establishment. The Chittenden Store building had previously been the Corbin General Store and dated to circa 1852.³⁹ The hotel changed ownership a number of times following Beggs' tenure, then closed around 1920, after which the building was used for a variety of other purposes. When Paul Birthisill of Park Ridge cleared the lot in 1945 for construction of a Ford garage, the Root Kent building was moved to the Stuhlman Engineering property at the east edge of the village along Main Street, where it was used as a storage building until the late 1990s when it was razed.⁴⁰

Plainfield was a hub of milling activity from the days of Walker's mill to near the turn of the century. The location of mills in Plainfield meant farmers coming into the village with their grains increased hotel, tavern, and store business. James Matthews built a mill in 1835, operating it until he moved to California in 1844.⁴¹ Yet another easterner, Matthews came from Massachusetts in 1831. After getting land along the DuPage River, he constructed the mill, dam, and mill race by 1835. The McCallister Brothers bought the mill from Matthews in 1844, adding a new saw mill which was operated by Burrell, Hagar, and Goodhue, then rented and operated by Alonzo Hemstreet after that.⁴² Their store was located at what is now 203 Main Street. In 1866, Noah Sunderlin and Walter Burch bought the mill. Sunderlin bought out Burch and operated the mill until his death in 1886, after which the mill was abandoned.⁴³ The mill was disassembled by Sidney Gray in 1894, with the lumber and timbers being used to build his machine shop at 612 Lockport Street, later Wagner's Shop.⁴⁴ The other remains of the mill complex were destroyed in 1934 when the concrete bridge was constructed on Route 59, but some of the stones had been saved by Miles Hartong.⁴⁵ In more recent history, Matthews' mill became known as "the old red mill."

James Matthews laid out the north part of the village in 1835 which was united with the original town as laid out by Ingersoll when Arnold recorded his 1845 plat, known as Arnold's Addition. Chester Ingersoll gave the village ground for a park (although the location changed between the 1834 and 1835 plats), under the condition that no permanent buildings should be erected upon it, with the park becoming the Village Green.⁴⁶ New England in character, the Village Green is a significant contribution to the character and development of the village. Moreover, the Village Green, along with the earliest period of architecture from c. 1830 - c. 1855, illustrates the great

influence of the settlers of the village, nearly all of whom were from New England, rather than immigrants.

Significantly, James Matthews also built a large house on the northeast corner of Naperville Road and Mill Street in 1837. Part of the original Matthews House was moved to and incorporated into this house; a third section of the original Matthews House was moved and incorporated into the McCallister Store, which was razed in 2005.⁴⁷ The house was damaged by fire in 1912, and the front entrance and windows were all replaced.⁴⁸ The Matthews family used space in their home for an inn and tavern to serve patrons of the mill and others coming to the village. Lorin Burdick also occupied the house, between 1838 and 1840. Burdick is thought to have been one of the carpenters who actually did the constructing of the house; he farmed the Matthews property for a while.⁴⁹ The house is extant and continues to have a high degree of integrity. It is an excellent example of the vernacular building and architecture of this early development period.

The first schoolhouse was built in North Plainfield in 1837 and burned in either 1846 or 1847, with a two story frame building replacing it at a cost of \$1,500.⁵⁰ In 1851, the village was divided into two districts, with a two story frame schoolhouse erected in the “lower district,” or South Plainfield, at a cost of \$1,200.

Early Settlement - Industries

Early industries played an important role in village life throughout the mid-nineteenth century. The John Bill Wagon Shop was located at 511 DesPlaines in 1834. Like many other settlers of the time, Bill was a New Englander, from Woodbury, Vermont. As also was typical of the time, the building housed a mixture of uses, with a school operating at one time on the upper story. Bill made the wagon that carried the first lumber from Walker’s Mill to Chicago, reportedly for the first house built there. As a wagonmaker, Bill was also a mechanic of sorts, doing substantial repair work on wagons, and also developing a reputation as a furniture maker.⁵¹ Bill sold the business sometime around 1841. Also in 1841, William Sanford Keene, a native New Yorker, set up a blacksmith shop on the lawn of his home at 506 Fox River Street.⁵² It was the first blacksmith shop in the village, and it established a family business and trade that would span a century.⁵³ Blacksmiths made a variety of hardware and implements, from latches and hinges, and tools, to kitchen utensils and ice skates.⁵⁴ Keene left his shop in 1849 and headed west to California, but returned to Plainfield in 1852 and reopened his shop. His son, Anson, took over the business when he returned from the Civil War, moving it to 613 Lockport Street; his residence was at the corner of Ottawa and Des Plaines streets.⁵⁵

As Plainfield approached the mid-nineteenth century, the Dillman Foundry became an important industry in the community. Lewis and Andrew Dillman, together with Cornelius Aultman, began manufacturing hand operated corn shellers, offering horse powers and general repairing, under the firm name Dillman & Company beginning in 1847, becoming the first such operation in the state.⁵⁶ The foundry was located at the southeast corner of Joliet Road/Route 30 and Division Street/Route 59. The company eventually relocated to Joliet for better shipping services, but Robert D. Webb then opened a wagon shop in the foundry building. Webb, from Yorkshire, England, had a very

successful establishment, employing twelve workman at one point during the Civil War. The company manufactured 150 wagons in 1854.⁵⁷ This business was so significant to the community that when the building was destroyed by fire on January 28, 1877, a \$3,000 loss, the townspeople raised \$300 to purchase timbers for a new building since the owner had no insurance.⁵⁸

A native of Connecticut, Miles Royce came to Plainfield and established a fanning mill factory. In 1834, his first year in operation, Royce manufactured fifty fanning mills, the first manufactured in northern Illinois.⁵⁹ Fanning mills offered grain separating services, separating the chaff from the grain.

The Naperville-Plainfield Road area was a busy thoroughfare. With the railroad coming in the 1880s, it meant many cattle and sheep were unloaded, with the animals driven in herds by men on horseback to area farms.⁶⁰ Adding to the activity in the area was the cheese factory. The stone and timber two story building stood just east of the old Red Mill, adjacent to a large ice house. The factory was constructed in 1880 by an organization of local dairy farmers who needed a market for milk and related products.⁶¹ The business proved to be yet another regional draw to Plainfield, bringing customers from Joliet, Lockport, and the extended Plainfield area for the factory, which produced cheese and butter, and sold cream and milk.⁶² The factory changed ownership a number of times, in rather short termed successions of five or ten year ownership, closing around 1903. The remains of the factory existed into the mid-nineteenth century until it was demolished.

Early Settlement - Government

From 1834 to 1861, the village had no formal governmental network operating the village. The village was incorporated under special act of the legislature on February 23, 1861, but it may have only included North Plainfield. In April 1869, Plainfield was again incorporated by special act, including both the north and south divisions, and on June 30, 1877, it was incorporated under the general law of the state.⁶³ The first Board of Trustees of the village included J. McCallister, President; George N. Chittenden, clerk; Robert Webb; Jonathan Hagar; and John D. Shreffler.⁶⁴

The early business for the newly established government dealt with the laying of wooden sidewalks, fencing since livestock roamed, and election procedures. Licensing for exhibitions, shows, and fairs, as well as liquor licensing and dealing with disorderly conduct were also early topics.⁶⁵ Utilities became an issue toward the turn of the century, with a water system for the village established in 1895. In 1907, the Western United Gas Company of Aurora was granted a franchise to lay their mains; the Economy Light and Power Company was granted a franchise to install poles and string lines in 1909.⁶⁶

Churches

Plainfield gained a reputation for having an unusual number of churches given the community's size, earning the name "Village of Churches."⁶⁷ With the influence of Reverend Walker and his successor Reverend Beggs, the Methodists erected the first church in Plainfield in 1836. It was replaced by a second building, constructed on Lockport Street, about 1845. Their third building, the extant

limestone building, was constructed in 1866 at a cost of about \$22,000. By 1878, the congregation had more than three hundred members.⁶⁸ The Baptist congregation was organized on October 16, 1834, building their first church in the fall of 1836 at a cost of \$2,500; by the writing of the 1878 *History of Will County*, that building was being used as a blacksmith's shop. The congregation built a new church in 1857 at a cost between \$4,500 and \$5,000. By 1878, the membership was 131. The Congregational Church was organized in September 1834 by Reverend N. C. Clarke, who had been preaching in the vicinity as early as 1832 and 1833. The congregation's church, which remains extant, was constructed in 1850 at a cost of \$2,200, "exclusive of the foundation," and was dedicated in June 1851.⁶⁹ Membership was near eighty by 1878. The Evangelical Church was built in 1855 at a cost of about \$3,000. Membership was 113 at the time of the 1878 *History of Will County*. That congregation operated the Northwestern College which located in Plainfield in 1851. The frame, two story College building cost \$10,000 to construct. In 1869, the College was relocated to Naperville, leaving the building vacant until 1871, when the Fox River Union College opened under the auspices of the Congregational Church. However, by 1872, it changed ownership again, becoming the Plainfield Academy; the building was later destroyed by fire.⁷⁰ The Universalist Church was built in 1868 at a cost of \$6,000.

Commerce & the Central Business District

Plainfield's commercial development continued to prosper. John Sargent and Jonathon Hagar opened the first store in Plainfield.⁷¹ After 1850, George Bennett (also Bennitt) moved twelve buildings from various parts of the community and set them on every other lot to create the original central business district. The lots in between required only the construction of front and rear walls, as well as a floor and a roof, which accounts for the diverse architectural forms in the original frame construction.⁷² By the late nineteenth century, the scene along the Lockport Street business district was one of a bustling commercial area, packed with buildings. The 1878 *History of Will County* lists the following business establishments in Plainfield at that time: two general dry goods and grocery stores, two grocery and hardware stores, two drug stores, one book and stationery store, one furniture store, one hotel, one restaurant, two livery stables, five blacksmith shops, three wagon shops, four practicing physicians, two cider mills, barber shops, meat markets, harness shops, tailor shops, paint shops, millinery shops, etc., "but neither saloons nor lawyers."⁷³ Romanesque Revival and Italianate style buildings date to this period, a time of substantial growth in the mid-late nineteenth century.

Railroads eventually came through Plainfield, considerably later than for many communities. Rail lines had been opened the entire length of the Santa Fe Trail before Plainfield got rail service. The Joliet, Aurora and Northern Railway was founded on March 22, 1884. After a survey between Joliet and Aurora, through the Village of Plainfield, the land was purchased and a contract was awarded to Milton Wood and George Edwards of Evanston; the railroad was completed on August 15, 1886.⁷⁴ By 1888, the line was leased to the Elgin, Joliet and Eastern Railway Company. It became the main hauler of freight from the Joliet steel mills.⁷⁵ The Elgin, Joliet and Eastern Railway Company Freight Depot and Passenger Station remains from this era; it was moved in 1999 from its original location along the tracks, east of Main Street, to Lockport Street/Route 126, at the northwest corner with the DuPage River. The E.J. & E. Railway, however, was primarily a freight line, with irregular

schedules and a single passenger car connected to a string of freight cars. With the coming of the Aurora, Plainfield and Joliet Railway, the tenure of the E.J. & E. Railway ended.

Fire and weather have unfortunately done much to shape the face of Plainfield's built environment. A fire in 1881 occurred mid-block of the south side of Lockport Street, causing substantial damage. The fire of 1891 destroyed much of the business district, with new construction drastically changing the appearance of Lockport Street, ushering in a modern era.⁷⁶ Most of the buildings lost to the fire were frame in construction; two out of the three which survived (all on the north side of Lockport Street) were brick,⁷⁷ and separated the frame Corbin & Chittenden Dry Goods and Grocery Store (later the A.C. Steiner Shop) from the fire. Rather uniquely, many of the buildings which were destroyed were gable front two story commercial buildings which reflected the Greek Revival and Gothic Revival styles of the earlier development period in the village. Varying substantially in height, despite all being two stories, the buildings were interspersed among later "False Front" vernacular buildings with the Italianate style, concealing lower gable front roofs behind. A raised wooden sidewalk united the block.

In 1892, the Masons purchased two lots for the construction of their new lodge along Lockport Street. Plans for the two story metal roofed building were drawn by J.E. Minott, an architect from Aurora. Mall and Doane, contractors from Aurora, won the construction bid, just under \$8,000. The building was completed by December 1892 and has always been distinctive for its onion shaped corner dome.⁷⁸ Wylie and Whitley's Busy Corner occupied the first story of the building at one time.

A new building for the Plainfield Academy was completed in 1882, erected upon the stone foundation of the college building which had burned. The cost was estimated at \$10,000.⁷⁹ The school included elementary grades as well as high school. In 1915, a red brick high school was built on the corner of Division and Lockport streets at a cost of \$25,000. It was designed by Herbert Cowell, a Will County native and architect, who also designed a number of other buildings in Plainfield. He was one of the most prolific architects in the village.⁸⁰ The building was located directly in front of the earlier building, set in close proximity in a rather odd siting. By 1920, six country schools consolidated with Plainfield schools, with the country landmarks being sold.⁸¹ When the new elementary school was built, the block bordered by Division, Lockport, and Bartlett included a succession of three school buildings built over more than seventy years; the old high school and earlier grade school/high school remained with the rear/west reentrant angle of the new buff brick grade school.

The replacement buildings, all brick, were handsomely in place before the 1898⁸² fire destroyed much of the south side of the same block. Included was the Opera House, which had just been constructed in 1889, on the southwest corner of Lockport and Illinois streets, and two adjacent buildings. Much of that side had also been frame in construction. A water tower was constructed in 1897, looming over the south side of the Lockport Street commercial buildings, then streetcar tracks were added in 1904, with the tracks running down the center of the dirt Lockport Street. In 1898, C.W. Marcks of Chicago, owner of the famous race horse "Joe Patchen," and also a shoe company, rebuilt on the

foundation of the old opera house. The Evarts bank relocated in the corner of the downstairs; upstairs was a theater with a stage on the south end, and little balconies (perhaps loge boxes) to each side.⁸³ The “clock tower” building remains extant. The Sennitt Building was also rebuilt, with the *Enterprise* newspaper operating in the back for twenty years.⁸⁴

Early Twentieth Century Industry

Grain continued to play an important role in village life. The Barr Elevator and the Kirsten and Smiley Elevator were on the south side of Main Street, just west of the railroad tracks. Around 1910 - 1912, ownership of those two elevators changed, with the death of James Smiley in 1910 and the subsequent formation of a stock company in 1912; then the Plainfield Grain company bought out the Kirsten Elevator shortly thereafter, accumulating other regional elevators in addition to the Plainfield facilities.⁸⁵ The company constructed the extant elevator, west across from the earlier site, in 1921. In 1922, the brick office building, now occupied by the Plainfield Historical Society and Museum, was constructed. The elevator had a capacity of 100,000 bushels. It operated until 1970 when the company was liquidated.⁸⁶

Lockwood Dairy may very well have one of the more interesting histories of development among businesses in the village. When Mrs. Roy (Estella) Lockwood was widowed in 1909 and left with two small sons to raise on her own, she decided to make the most of her small farm on James Street and go into the dairy business.⁸⁷ Reportedly, Mrs. Lockwood tended to the cows, while her two sons delivered milk to houses in a child’s wagon. By 1922, they were able to purchase pasteurizing equipment and delivered the milk by horse and wagon.⁸⁸ The successful operation eventually expanded to produce cheese and butter, with milk supplies being picked up from Model T box type trucks.⁸⁹ The new modern plant was opened in 1950. The business was operated by Mrs. Lockwood, her son Cecil, then her son Zerrell, then his son Jerry.

Electric Park

In 1904, the Joliet, Plainfield and Aurora Railway Company (Aurora, Plainfield & Joliet Railway Company after 1905) developed the twenty-acre Electric Park. The purpose of the park was to stimulate business for the electric line, but the park obviously provided years of enjoyment for the region as well. Located along the Du Page River near the west end of the business district, the park encompassed twenty acres which had formerly been the cow pasture of John Sennitt.⁹⁰ It featured a toboggan slide, a large tent, and the steam engine which powered the merry-go-round on the west side of the river; on the east side were the bandstand, the boat house and landing, and the restaurant. Curvilinear walkways lined with benches between broad grassy areas gave plenty of opportunities for picnicking and relaxation. An international gasoline engine display, two-lane bowling alley, dance pavilion, and a concession stand were also among the park’s features, in addition to a grandstand and athletic field, and a 5,000 seat auditorium.

Swimming and boating were also included, with bathers carrying small, flat-bottom toboggans up a steep flight of stairs to slide down the adjacent chute, usually two to a toboggan. The river was about five feet deep at Electric Park, working well for swimmers as well as boaters along the one-mile

course.⁹¹ The park was a great attraction to the village, drawing visitors from a wide area including both Joliet and Aurora. The park included more than eighty cottages and a substantial campground. A tunnel facilitated pedestrian traffic under Route 30. As was typical of such developments of this time, the cottages were for seasonal use only; however, the cottages of Electric Park were rather unique. The gable front, one story cottages had wood floors, with board sides built up about fifteen inches from the ground. Rather than wood walls, the remainder of the cottage consisted of canvas sides with screen doors and windows. Naturally, each cottage had electric lights, gas, and sewer/water.⁹² Shed roof front porches extended off the gable fronts and provided relaxing space for socializing. Rows of cottages faced each other, with an ample grass allée between, lined with trees. The park's auditorium was used for Will County Chautauquas which were held annually for several years during the last week of July and the first week of August. In addition to ample seating, the auditorium included a stage and pipe organ.

The Aurora, Plainfield and Joliet Electric Company went out of business in 1923, as the era of the automobile was well initiated. Lawrence "Butch" J. Crowley purchased the park property in 1923, and began to divide the cottage area and sell lots.⁹³ The Auditorium continued to be used as a dance hall and roller skating rink and by 1975, it was the only original building standing. In the late 1970s, it was used as a warehouse and school bus garage, then was eventually demolished.⁹⁴

Recreation in the area eventually included Lake Rewick. The location of the lake was originally a small gravel pit for township use. The first gravel was stripped off in the late nineteenth century, but the water did not appear until sometime later, around 1915, thus forming Lake Renwick.⁹⁵ The resulting lake meant that some early structures were moved elsewhere, including to the village, for continued use.

From Trails to the Automobile Era

Roads continued to be part of Plainfield's developmental history into the early twentieth century, as the Lincoln Highway Association included Lockport Street in its plan for the first transcontinental route from New York to San Francisco. The road was the vision of Carl G. Fisher of Indianapolis, who created the Indianapolis Motor Speedway, paving it with brick and inaugurating the Indianapolis 500 in 1911.⁹⁶

Fishers's comprehensive interest in automobiles included founding Prest-O-Lite Company, which made carbide headlights, providing the only reliable light for night driving before the all-electric car.⁹⁷ Others had contemplated a coast to coast road; the American Automobile Association had suggested one as early as 1902. What was unique about Fisher's efforts was that he was the first to propose a road with a real improvement plan and the means to finance it.⁹⁸ In September 1912, Fisher began promoting the Coast-to-Coast Highway, a gravel highway that he had projected could be built for about ten million dollars, a low figure even for 1912.⁹⁹ Fisher's plan provided for the money to be used for basic road building materials, with labor and machinery being provided by the counties, towns, and cities along the yet undetermined route. His vision had perfect timing: the automobile was well established by 1912, but roads were not. Winter and wet weather had meant

that the some 180,000 automobiles which were registered by 1910 would spend substantial time out of use. And with the Panama-Pacific Exposition only two and one-half years away, San Francisco would make a logical destination.¹⁰⁰

The network of advisors along the proposed road was extensive and included Plainfield's own U.S.G. Blakely, owner and editor of the *Enterprise*. The network of "consuls" numbered 263 and Blakely's tenure lasted an astonishing twenty-six years, including being selected as a director.¹⁰¹ Blakely's efforts to facilitate the new modern highways passage through the village were extensive. He wrote letters, printed many editorials in his newspaper, and even traveled to Detroit to examine the new concrete road that had been used there.¹⁰² Blakely even helped convince Illinois Governor Dunne to create a state highway department. Plainfield's portion of the road, named Lincolnway, followed the main streets of the village. It was paved in 1921 by the Ralph H. Newkirk Construction Company of Joliet.

Perhaps surprisingly, Illinois and Iowa had proved to be the most difficult states in which to develop the best route. The route was to eventually pass through Omaha and because of Illinois's flat terrain, the normal adherence to rail lines was not as essential. Reportedly some fifty routes were possible across the state. The route that was finally selected was a route which had already been used by cross continental drives which had occurred, first in 1903. In 1908, the Great Race came through the same route.¹⁰³ One of the last acts of the Lincoln Highway Association was to mark the highway; the Association chose concrete markers to officially dedicate the highway to Abraham Lincoln. In a rather unusual event, the 3,000 markers were erected on September 1, 1928 at 9:00 A.M. by boy scout troops across the country. Apparently only 2,436 of the 220 pound markers were actually erected, with the fate of the extra markers unknown.¹⁰⁴ On June 15, 2000, the Lincoln Highway was designated as a National Scenic Byway.

The highway ushered in a new era of automobile dominance, with auto-related buildings to follow. One such building was the Standard Oil Gasoline Station at 600 West Lockport Street. Constructed in 1932, the station had a prime corner location. It was listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 1984.

In the early twentieth century, Plainfield experienced expansion along its eastern border. Hartong's Subdivision was approved on July 1, 1926, and consisted of the area bounded by Lockport, Miles, and Ottawa streets. Despite the later subdivision date, extant buildings from Plainfield's earliest era of development still remain in this area, even at the easternmost ends of both Lockport and Ottawa streets. In 1925, the library was established, with the Nimmons and McClester families endowing the library. Initially the library was in a small building just east of the original part of the Plainfield National Bank, until the new library was constructed in 1941. Local builder and designer Clifton Brown constructed the Georgian Revival building.¹⁰⁵

America's "mother road," as author John Steinbeck called it, eventually found its way through Plainfield as other less modern trails had in the past. In 1940, an alternative route to Route 66

offered travelers the choice of driving to Joliet or taking the other route a little farther to the west to go to Plainfield. Both choices in the fork in the road were still Route 66, eventually linking up in Gardner. However, since the route through Plainfield was not part of the original system, inaugurated in 1926, this particular spur is not widely viewed as being particularly significant within the road's history. In fact, *The Route 66 Traveler's Guide and Roadside Companion* by Tom Synder, the founder of the Route 66 Association, does not even recommend following this spur on a modern version of the experience of traveling the route.¹⁰⁶

Into the 21st Century

Plainfield continued to experience industrial growth even after the 1960s, including Continental Can (later Kerr Glass), McLaughlin Manufacturing, Radiation Polymer, and the annexation of the industrial park area near Van Dyke Road. Residential areas such as Newkirk/Pratt/Highview/Union developed in the late 1950s and after, as well as other cul-de-sac areas such as Penn Road and Lakeside. Architecturally, the period revival styles such as Tudor Revival and Colonial Revival, were supplanted by Ranch houses, ushering in a modern era of residential construction.

On August 28, 1990, the Village of Plainfield was hit by yet another tornado, its most serious devastation from weather. In a swath which cut across the southwestern section of the village, just west of the Village Green, across James, Fox River, and Commercial streets, the tornado caused extensive damage and demolition, including Plainfield High School. The resulting new construction along James, Ottawa, and Fox River, changed the appearance and feel of that section of the village, affecting historic district potential to the western extent of the village.

Plainfield's history may realistically be most affected by the current context of growth and development. Between 1990 and 2000, the village's population increased by 186%, from 4,557 to 13,038. In 2002, a special census was completed and the population was 21,000, prompting yet another special census at the end of 2005. The village population is now 30,314, with the Northeastern Illinois Planning Commission projecting a population of 65,774 for Plainfield by 2030. In one of these years alone, the village experience four times the number of building permits as it had extant buildings at the time.