

ELMHURST HISTORY HIGHLIGHT: The Early Days of Elmhurst

In its early years, Elmhurst was known as Cottage Hill. A quiet farming community for much of the 19th century, the town finds its origins in the years following the Black Hawk War in 1832 and the subsequent expulsion of Native American tribes from the area around Fort Dearborn and the fledging settlement of Chicago. Farmers began to slowly settle the area in the late 1830s, and the government formally constituted DuPage County in 1839.

The community in northern York Township began to coalesce in 1843, when a settler by the name of Gerry Bates arrived from Ohio and built a tavern and stagecoach stop near the present-day intersection of Cottage Hill Avenue and St. Charles Road, the latter being an important overland route at the time. Bates named his establishment Hill Cottage, and opened a post office at his business in 1845. Locals began to associate the area with the name of Bates' tavern and post office, and the community became known as Cottage Hill.



M2010.1.2—Gerry Bates' post office and general store on W. Park Ave, across the street from the original Galena & Chicago Union depot, 1870s.

The character of the settlement changed dramatically in 1849 with the arrival of the Galena & Chicago Union Railroad that summer. Once again, Bates played an important role in this episode by offering the railroad company the right-of-way through his property in exchange for the promise that the depot would be built in the center of his land, at the intersection of the tracks and York Road. This allowed the enterprising settler to build a general store directly across from the station and move his post office from Hill Cottage Tavern to a more advantageous location by the depot.

By linking the community to the growing city of Chicago, the railroad brought more commerce and settlers to the area. In 1853, Bates platted a subdivision called "Cottage Hill" on the north side of the tracks between York Street and Addison Avenue, forming the core of the town and the future downtown business district of Elmhurst.

Throughout the 1850s and 1860s, the town grew slowly but steadily, drawing settlers of mostly English and German descent. Cottage Hill also appealed to wealthy businessmen seeking to find a calmer setting

away from the bustling city. The town's rural setting with its convenient rail connection to the city drew several affluent families to the area, who built large estate homes on landscaped properties reminiscent of European nobility. Although these grand estates have long since been sold and subdivided, the Wilder Mansion at 211 S. Prospect is a relic from this era of our history.



P73.1.7—Estate home of Thomas Barbour Bryan near the intersection of Cottage Hill Avenue and St. Charles Road, circa 1900.

One such businessman, Thomas Barbour Bryan, became a community leader in Cottage Hill, establishing one of the first churches in the town. Bryan also donated a large tract of land to the German Evangelical Synod in 1871, which formed the basis of the modern Elmhurst University. In addition, Bryan is credited with convening a group of locals to vote on changing the name of the fledgling community from Cottage Hill to Elmhurst in 1868. The name change was spurred by the fact that the mail service often confused Cottage Hill with other similarly named communities. The Elmhurst name was officially adopted by the U.S. postal service in 1870.

Elmhurst grew rapidly following the Great Chicago Fire in 1871. As the community expanded, local businessman Henry L. Glos led the charge to formally incorporate the settlement, in an effort to regulate the increasingly rowdy taverns in the town's central business district. Citizens voted in favor of incorporating as a village in 1882, with Glos elected as village president. The early pioneering years of Cottage Hill were over, and Elmhurst was well on its way to becoming a modern city.

By Daniel Lund, Elmhurst History Museum Staff, May 2021