*Editor’s note: A group of citizens is planning a year-long celebration during 2021 of the 150th anniversary of Gibson City’s founding. Articles with historical information will be periodically submitted for the goal of educating or reminding residents of historical information.*

**What’s in a name, historically that is!**

With a nod to Shakespeare, this occasional column about Gibson City’s history was started by asking the question, “What’s in a name?” The following is a list of well-known names in and around Gibson City, along with their historical background and some current updates.

**Gibson City**

The town’s name honors the maiden name of its founder’s wife, Margaret Gibson Lott. She married founder Jonathon B. Lott in 1867 at the age of 23. Miss Gibson was born in Ohio, but was living in Danvers (McLean County) when she married Mr. Lott.

Mr. and Mrs. Lott were the town’s first residents in 1869, and their first home measured just 12 x 14 feet. Lott constructed it by adapting a railroad car, a common practice then due to short lumber supplies. Thus that meager home was the fledgling town’s first building. Before winter of 1869 though, Lott had erected a frame house.

Mrs. Lott was later referred to as “the mother of Gibson City” for her many civic involvements, including as a charter member of First Christian Church. Her sister, Miss Hattie Gibson, became the town’s first bride when she married Bruce McCormick. Seven years after Mr. Lott’s death, Mrs. Lott remarried, this time to O.H. Damon, another Civil War veteran and town leader. When Damon was elected mayor for one year in 1886, she assisted his work.

The word “city” was added to the town’s name by the postal department because it believed there could be confusion with another Illinois town named “Gilson,” which this day remains a small, unincorporated town in Knox County.

**Sangamon Avenue**

The town’s central business street was originally called Main Street but was later named after the Sangamon River that crosses IL Route 47 south of Gibson City. The river is believed to get its name from a Pottawatomie word “Sain-guee-mon,” translated as “where there is plenty to eat.”

The street was always wide, as it is today, and early cars parked in two rows down the street’s middle in the downtown area. Sangamon Avenue is 100 feet wide, with other streets built at 80-foot widths. The street was paved with bricks, as it mostly still is today. Amazingly, these bricks were first laid in 1906.

**Lott Boulevard**

While not one of the county’s earliest settlers (that would be Andrew Jordan in 1851), Jonathon B. Lott established a 12-block plat for Gibson City in 1871 and incorporated the town in 1872. Lott was born in Ohio but became a farm boy in McLean County and then bought a Ford County farm in 1869. Lott was a classmate of Joseph W. Fifer, who would become the 19th governor of Illinois (1889–1893) and prove helpful in later Gibson City railroad development. Mr. Lott and Governor Fifer also fought in the Civil War together, with Fifer crediting Lott for saving his life. Lott did not live to see the town grow a great deal because he died in 1879.

The broad north–south street that bears Lott’s name is situated two blocks east of Sangamon Avenue. It was originally called Lott Street. The street was paved in 1922 with a curbed grass median in its center, and the “street “designation was changed to “boulevard” in 1923. Over the years, the median has been removed section by section (not without some citizen protests), and the center area has been paved over. The street most recently was repaved from 13th–18th Streets during a 2015–16 city project. In 2021, only the block between 12th and 13th Streets still retains the center median.

**Moyer District Library and Moyer Fountain**

There were at least two structures that honored the name of William Moyer, an early resident who became wealthy as a grain dealer in Gibson City, with his said to be the town’s first business.

The William Moyer Library (forerunner to today’s Moyer District Library) was established by city resolution in 1911 to honor Moyer’s wishes for a free library with his contribution of $14,000 toward the town’s first permanent library building.

Moyer also donated $1,000 for a 15-foot fountain located at the intersection of Sangamon Avenue and 9th Streets. It was one of three fountains donated to the city, and all three were unveiled in 1895 when the first city water works were turned on. Moyer’s cast-iron fountain was removed in 1926 to Mellinger Park (north park) but eventually scrapped due to deterioration.

**Lee Lowery Post 568 American Legion**

Lee Lowery Post 568 American Legion was organized in 1919 with 50 charter members. The post was subsequently chartered in 1920 and named in honor of Lee C. Lowery, an Army Private who was killed in action September 16, 1918 during World War I. The Legion Hall is now located at 218 N. Sangamon Ave.

The Sons of the American Legion were organized in March 1971 with 15 charter members.

The first Commandeer was Dr. R.N. Lane, and the current Commander is Daren Chase.

**Brotherton Post 6289 Veterans of Foreign Wars**

An organizational meeting was held December 15, 1950, in the basement of Goben’s Bakery (Dick Goben was elected as the first quartermaster), with state officers present to organize the new post. As one of its first activities, the post sponsored a carnival fundraiser in summer 1951 in a field a on the Walker family farm just east of Route 54 (still farmland but now owned by Provin Farms).

The post’s current building at 122 S. Lott was also its first permanent location, purchased in 1952 with the first meeting held there in February 1953. The building has been remodeled several times over the years. A ladies auxiliary was formed in 1951.

The post honors Lt. William Brotherton, who was born near Guthrie and enlisted in the U.S. Army just 10 days after the United States entered World Word I in April 1917. He was an aviator who specialized in shooting down enemy observation balloons. For his feats, he earned the Distinguished Service Cross for “extraordinary heroism in action.” He was shot down on October 10, 1918, and escaped capture but later died of pneumonia after being found. Because Brotherton was an alum of the University of Illinois, one of the columns at Memorial Stadium bears his name.

The post’s first commander was William Hoover, and the current commander is Mike Grove.

**Mellinger Park**

Commonly referred to as “north park” for many years, this one- block square area is officially named Mellinger Park. The park is located between 13th and 14th Streets on its north and south sides, and Lott Boulevard and Church Street on its east and west sides. The large wooden pavilion there was built by the local Chautauqua Association, but then sold in 1929 to the city for the association’s indebtedness of $250. The park’s playground area was recently updated to be suitable for children of all abilities, with modern play equipment and a specialized rubberlike surface beneath. This improvement came about largely through a multi-year effort to raise funds by Gibson City Rotary Club’s that began in 2014, with supplemental funds appropriated by the city to complete the project.

In 1873, Jacob C. Mellinger and his father purchased 960 acres of land adjoining the town, on which they raised livestock and crops. Mellinger later moved to town and became active in civic and government affairs. As highway commissioner, he was the first to promote graveling a road in the township. He donated six acres of his farmland for the park. He also platted lots facing Church Street across from the park, and this block became known as “Silk Stocking Row” for the large homes built, several of which are still standing. The Mellingers returned to Ohio in 1893, and few now remember their name.

**Arrowsmith Park**

What is commonly referred to as “south park” is officially named Arrowsmith Park. The park takes up one-half of the block that is bordered by Lott Boulevard on the east, an alley on its west side, and 1st and 2nd Streets on its south and north sides.

The park was given to the city in August 1923 by Hyland P. Arrowsmith from land he had purchased from the Daniels estate. Arrowsmith moved to Gibson City at age 18 with his parents and started out helping in the family’s broom factory. He went on to own or manage many businesses and several residential properties.

Arrowsmith was perhaps best known for being instrumental in chartering a Lions Club in 1922 in Gibson City, which then boasted the state’s smallest town with a club. Arrowsmith was also instrumental in bringing the state’s Lions Club Convention to town in 1925, and when heading the Gibson City Chamber of Commerce, in bringing Ill. Rt. 47 through Gibson City. He served as Gibson City Mayor from 1909-1910. He died in 1934 at age 75.

Ten years after Arrowsmith donated the land, Arrowsmith Park was officially dedicated in November 1933. During the ceremony, a five-ton boulder donated by the local Lions Club was placed, carrying a plaque provided by the city. It remains in place today near the playground and north of the shelter.

A 1915 JJ Case steam engine is enclosed within a chain-link fence at the park’s south end. The steam engine was donated to the city by Richard Moody in 1970 in memory of his grandfather, Pearl B. Sawyer.

An existing campground at the park’s south end was upgraded by city action beginning in 2008 to become an RV/camper park, complete with paved pads and full hookups.

**Lowry Park**

Known now as Gibson City’s “west park,” this park was given to the city in fall 1967 by Mrs. Elizabeth Lowry Elkin to be used as a children’s playground. Recent improvements include a new baseball diamond and shelter. In 2020, the Ed Day Memorial Skate Park was opened, built with citizen-donated funds and the city’s approval.

Emmanuel Lowry became editor and publisher of Gibson City’s first newspaper, the Gibson City *Courier*, upon moving to the village in 1875. His two sons continued to operate the newspaper, merging it with the *Enterprise* in 1933 and then selling their interest to George Woolley and his son John.

**LeFevre Park**

This small park is on the east side of Church Street’s 300 block and just north of the United Methodist Church (corner of Church and 10th Streets), but it is no longer owned by the city. The Gibson City Council approved the park’s sale to the UMC in February 2003 for a possible building. The space remains a park in 2021, and a stone marker with plaque is there to commemorate the park’s donation by Samuel J. and Laura A. LeFevre in June 1915. The park is bordered by the church’s parking lot to the south and railroad tracks to the north.

LeFevre moved with his parents to a farm in Drummer Grove Township in 1856, but by 1872 he had moved to town (which he could see from the family farm). LeFevre operated a lumber and coal business in Gibson City and also built an electric light plant to provide local electricity. He also served in many government offices, including as a member of the first village board.

**Drummer Township Cemetery**

Drummer Township Cemetery’s original site was on 10 acres deeded to the township by Jonathon B. Lott in 1874. Lott originally planned to build his home on the knoll at the center of the site. The cemetery still exists on the same site at Gibson City’s west edge, but the site has been expanded over the years to a total of 40 acres, 20 acres of which are currently used for grave sites.

The original cemetery was laid out in a circular pattern, with Soldiers Circle at the top of the knoll and most of the earliest graves are within or adjacent to that circle. The first recorded burial was that of Mrs. Mary Bowker, who died at her farm home south of town in 1876. The current total of burials is approaching 7,000.

Information from headstones has been compiled by the members of the Governor Thomas Ford Chapter of the DAR and other individuals, including the late Mike Upton. Upton’s information and current entries are maintained in the cemetery’s office or available online at various websites such as Find A Grave.

Additions to the now 40-acre site include a veteran’s memorial at the southwest corner in 2008 and a columbarium in 2018 near that memorial. The 48 niches in the columbarium are designated equally for veterans and general public. With space for two urns per niche, the columbarium has space for up to 96 urns.

**Drummer Township**

Tom Cheney, an early resident of Cheney’s Grove (Saybrook area), had a dog that he named Drummer because the dog was good at “drumming up” wild game. While hunting in a grove northwest of Gibson City in 1836, Cheney became angry at the dog for breaking loose and scaring off a deer, so he shot Drummer. His hunting companions immediately suggested they name the wooded area Drummer Grove, and so it became known. Eventually, residents used the area as a recreational spot for swimming, and there was even an early ball diamond there. Drummer’s name also was honored in other ways: Drummer Township, Drummer Township Cemetery, and Drummer Township High School (forerunner of Gibson City High School, now GCMS High School).

**Dix Township**

Originally, two ranges in Ford County were together known as Drummer Grove Township. The name for the entire area was changed to Dix Township in 1864 to honor Gen. John Adams Dix of New York, a Union general who was known for developing a prisoner exchange program and who later became U.S. Secretary of the Treasury. The original Drummer Grove Township was later split into the townships we know today as Drummer, Dix, Peach Orchard, and Sullivant.

**Ford County**

Gibson City sits in the southwest corner of Ford County. The county was formed February 17, 1859, and as the last county to be formed in Illinois, it has an irregular “L” shape. The county is named in honor of Governor Thomas Ford, the state’s eighth governor and the first to be reared in the state. The county adopted the township form of government in 1860, and it has a total of 12 townships within its borders. Each township has its own governing body.

* Compiled by Jean Noellsch from these resources: *The History of Ford County, Illinois* (1985) and *A Lott of History in 100 Years: Centennial History of Gibson City, Illinois* (1971), Wikipedia, Gibson City *Courier* (newspapers.com), City Superintendent Randy Stauffer, and Randy Ferguson Sextant of Drummer Township Cemetery.