1850s town had many businesses

This is the latest of a series of articles on Lockport history by John Lamb. Lamb, a Lockport resident, is president of the Illinois Canal Society. A professor of history at Lewis University, Lamb is active in the Will County Historical Society and the Lockport Historical Preservation Council. This week’s article deals with Lockport in the 1850s.

By 1859, Lockport was a well-established town, but in many respects was still a frontier settlement. Even though the Illinois and Michigan Canal was important to the town, Lockport was almost self-sufficient; the town produced most of what it consumed.

The town was not incorporated as a village until 1853. Later in the decade the railroad would come to the town, and by the end of the 1850s the town found itself tied closer to outside manufacturers and the national economy.

Lockport had a variety of occupations that could be considered unusual in a town of about 1000. During those years, the blacksmith doubled as a maker of farm implements. Shoes were made on demand. The town had a brick maker, cabinet maker, harness maker, and several barrel makers, or cooperers. There were also wagon makers, basket makers, carpenters, stone masons, lawyers, and doctors.

The State Street area was then, as now, the commercial center of the town. Located along the streets were several stores, blacksmith shops, offices for doctors and lawyers, as well as canal warehouses.

Merchants in 1850 were willing to take locally produced goods in exchange for their sale items.

Christian Baldy’s store was located just south of the present Canal Museum. Baldy claimed to be well-stocked in dry goods, groceries, boots and shoes, hardware, crockery, glassware, drugs and medicine, liquors, dyes and lamp oils. He would take all kinds of produce in exchange for his merchandise. Prices were not fixed, and haggling was a common practice.

One forward-looking merchant, T. C. Haywood, opened his store under the banner of “time is money” and that one price would be strictly maintained.

Miss Ayers’ millinery store was next to Haywood’s establishment. Millinery was the only occupation for women in 1850, and it was confined to unmarried women or widows.

Although store owners such as Baldy sold groceries as well as hardware, there were also stores that sold nothing but clothing and hardware.

Other stores advertised that they would buy meat and other commodities, as well as skins and furs.

The largest store was probably Norton’s. When the canal opened, it announced the arrival of a wide variety of goods brought in via the waterway. It seemed everything was available: “Palm hats, wall paper, black foxed hip gaiters, men’s hip and goat boots, hip and coarse brogans, fine calf and seal pumps.”

For the medicinal intellectual needs of the community, there was S. Merril and Sons Book and Drugstore on State Street between 9th and 10th Streets. Books were available on arithmetic, grammar, philosophy, mathematics, history, chemistry, reading and spelling. All the latest novels were available, as were the popular periodicals of the day, like “Harper’s,” “Graham’s,” “International,” “Putnam’s,” and “Goday’s.”

There were five tailor shops in Lockport, one owned by a man with the appropriate name of G. A. Suits.

There were two hotels in town. The largest, the Morse Hotel, was located on the east side of State Street between 5th and 6th Streets.

Lockport had only two lawyers but had eight doctors. One of the doctors was editor of the Lockport Telegraph newspaper. Because of the I & M Canal offices, there were four engineers in Lockport.

Two storage and forwarding
agents had warehouses on the
canal. G. B. Martin was located at
8th and Commerce; another was
located at 12th Street on the
hydraulic basin.

Lockport’s daguerreotypist
was G. A. Parks. His emporium
was located on State Street. If not
satisfied with the finished
product, it was not necessary to
pay the 75 cent fee for portraits.

A furniture factory was run by
S.S. Chamberlain. The factory
produced chairs, bed posts and
high-quality coffins. Chamberlain
also sold imported
furniture. Wood used in
Chamberlain’s operation was
cherry, mahogany, and walnut.
The furniture factory was located
on Commerce Street between 10th
and 11th; its power came from
steam.

One of the more interesting
local enterprises was the distillery
operated by John Fiddyment. His
advertisement indicates that his
was a hospitable place where the
spirits were available and
friendly: “Wanted at Lockport
Distillery: 20,000 bushels of corn
in the ear, for which the highest
price will be paid.

“I have one of Mr. Hatch’s
Corn Shellers in use, and can
shell corn as fast as any two men
can load it. I can shell from 120
to 160 bushels per hour with ease.
You can have your corn shelled
as quick as you can unload it.
Take a warm by the fire and drink
of good brown whiskey. Return
home with your cash with
pleasure.”

Fiddyment also did coopering,
for he needed barrels in which to
ship out his product. There were a
total of five cooperers in Lockport;
the largest number worked for a
firm that built barrels for flour
shipments from Norton’s mill.

Hiram Norton’s flour mill and
grain warehouse was the largest
single factory in Lockport in
1850. The operation was located
on the canal at 10th Street and on
the hydraulic basin at 12th Street.

The mill was operated by
water power from the canal; it
had a capital investment of
$10,000 and was one of the
biggest factories in the county. It
had stones for grinding wheat and
corn and exported flour reputed to
be the best in the northern part of
the state. Four millers were
employed at the mill.

John Lane Jr. in partnership
with other blacksmiths,
manufactured plows and
cultivators. His machinery was
steam driven, making him unique
among the nine blacksmiths in
Lockport.

Lane would make on demand
his patented corn planter, as well
as plows for breaking up the
virgin prairie. That type of plow
had been invented by Lane’s
father, who was also making
plows on request at his smithy in
Homer Township, just outside
Lockport.

Phillips and Waterman at 12th
and Commerce manufactured
carriages. The shop was steam
operated, and the carriage makers
promised to make “all kinds of
wagons, carriages and buggies.”

Three harness makers and a
tanner were also located in town. The
tanner used canal waterpower
to produce 2500 sides of leather
and 300 calf skins for local use
and export.

There were two butchers
employing five men in Lockport
in 1850. The largest was James
Wright’s, which in that year
slaughtered 45 tons of beef, 45
tons of pork, and four tons of
mutton.

Stone quarries were a very
large industry in 1850. The
Sanger-Casey quarry was the
largest in the area. It employed
100 men. This was seasonal work,
as the quarries closed down
during the four winter months.
George Gaylord’s quarry
employed 30 men. A lime-
burning enterprise produced 4500
bushels of lime annually. The
lime was used for mortar in the
building trade.

Lastly, there were the
occupations directly related to the
canal. Engineers were employed
at the canal offices. Three
locktenders managed the four
locks in Lockport. A boatyard
was located at 3rd Street and
the canal. The enterprise
employed four boat builders
and several carpenters. In 1855,
the boatyard was building 15
canal boats a year. Three canal
boat captains and ten canal
boat hands lived in town.