

Madison County Historical Society

MCHS News

May 2020

Opening Doors to Madison County History

Vol. 8 No. 3

Historical Museum 715 N Main Street Edwardsville, IL 62025 Hours:

The museum is currently closed for renovation.

Archival Library 801 N Main Street Telephone Hours: Wed-Fri 9 am - 4 pm Sunday 1 pm - 4 pm

Phone: 618-656-7569

Web Address: madcohistory.org

E-mail: info@madcohistory.org

About Us:

The MCHS museum complex, consisting of a modern archival library, a museum in the 1836 Weir House and the Helms Collection Center, is owned by the nonprofit Madison County Historical Society and operated jointly with Madison County.

The Madison County Historical Society is a 501(c)(3) charitable organization.

HIGHLAND MAN HAS A LIFETIME OF ACHIEVEMENT

by Cindy Reinhardt
The Madison County Historical Society
nominated Roland Harris, of Highland, for the
Illinois State Historical Society's 2020 Lifetime
Achievement Award. This prestigious
recognition is awarded to local historians who
have gone above and beyond to preserve the
history of their community. If Roland, many
years ago, set out to qualify for this award,

many would say he is an over-achiever be-

tailed later in this article, are impressive.

cause his accomplishments, which will be de-

One of the things that inspired Roland's love of history is his personal family story which includes over two hundred years of accomplishment in eastern Madison County. It should be noted that Roland himself, at 94, has been a witness to nearly half of that timespan, and fortunately, has recorded its history for future generations.

Roland Paul Harris was the second of two boys born to Irwin and Maybelle (Willman) Harris of Alhambra, Illinois. His father, Irwin, owned a barber shop and insurance agency on

Main Street. The family lived in a house next door, making it convenient for Irwin to call his wife over to handle an insurance client if he

was doing a haircut. His maternal grand-parents, John and Annie (Mulloy) Willman, operated the East End Hotel and Saloon across the street where Roland and his brother, Udell, spent many hours with their grandmother at the hotel.

Roland attended Alhambra schools through his junior



Roland Paul Harris

year, all that was offered in Alhambra at that time. Students who wanted a high school diploma had to take their senior year in nearby Highland at either Highland High School or St.

continued page 4

An Open Letter to MCHS Members and Friends

The last few weeks have certainly complicated our usually busy spring schedule. Programs have been canceled, and both the museum and library are now closed. We are so grateful to the staff and volunteers who ensure that the work of the Society, the Museum and the Archival Library continues, despite social distancing.

During this unprecedented time, I hope you will look to our website (https://madcohistory.org/) and/or follow our Facebook page to continue learning about our unique heritage. If you are working on family history projects and need assistance, you can call the Society at 618-656-1294 or the Archival Library at 618-656-7569. We invite you to share with us what you would like to see more of in the coming weeks as we continue to navigate this crisis.

We are learning new information about the Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security (CARES) Act which will allow taxpayers to deduct up to \$300 in charitable donations from their taxable income. The rule will apply only to charitable contributions made in 2020. This is taken "above the line" meaning you can take it in addition to the standard deduction. A gift of \$300 might not seem huge, but for MCHS the impact would be tremendous. Please consider sending a check or donating through the MCHS website.

We understand you may be feeling uncertain or worried about the status of the COVID-19 situation. What happens in the next few weeks will be out of our control. But one important thing you can do is continue to support the Madison County Museum and Archival Library through a gift to the Madison County Historical Society. Your gift today ensures that together we can remain strong and prepared to continue serving our community. Let's focus our energy on remaining united and supporting one another in this difficult time.

Sincerely,

MCHS President Candace Ladd

ABOUT US

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VOLUNTEERS

There are abundant and varied opportunities for volunteers at either the Museum or the Archival Library. If interested, please call 618-656-7569.

MEMBERSHIPS

Several membership levels are available to those interested in supporting the work of preserving Madison County history through an MCHS membership. Memberships run on the calendar year, Jan 1-Dec 31. Applications are available on our website, or at the Archival Library.

PUBLICATIONS MCHS NEWS

6 issues annually Cindy Reinhardt, Editor

ARCHIVAL LIBRARY SPOTLIGHT

Although the Archival Library is closed to the public, employees are still at the library during regular business hours (socially distanced) and working on cataloging and scanning donations of documents and photographs. They are also answering calls, so if genealogists find a place where they are "stuck" and need a look-up, they can call or email (cmfrisse@co.madison.il.us) for assistance. The phone number for the Archival Library is 618-656-7569. Hours for telephone inquiries are Sun. 1-4 p.m. and Wed.-Fri. 9 a.m.-4 p.m.

Museum Superintendent Jon Parkin, in addition to his regular duties, is actively looking for items which document the COVID-19 pandemic and its effect on Madison County residents. The materials might be suitable for an exhibit or can be used by scholars looking back at this era from sometime in the

future. He is looking for compositions, photographs, artwork, artifacts or anything from local businesses that are manufacturing PPE materials. Copies of journals from those working on the front lines, coping with lost income, homeschooling children, or adjusting to a change in lifestyle because of the pandemic would prove valuable for future historians.

Parkin is also coordinating with the Edwardsville Public Library on a COVID-19 project aimed at, but not limited to, teenagers. For information on the *Teen Historian Project*, go to: https://www.edwardsvillelibrary.org/teen-historian-challenge Parkin says he'll accept materials from "kids of all ages." Others involved in the project are Bob Werden of the Regional Office of Education #41 and a number of local educators



MUSEUM SPOTLIGHT

Construction is continuing at the Madison County Historical Museum building as funds and weather allow. The scaffolding on the south side of the building is still there while the contractor waits for weather that is consistently above 50 degrees. Bids are being taken to restore the back porch and the restoration of windows will also begin again soon. Additional donations are needed to complete the exterior renovation.

Museum curators continue to research and design online and off-site exhibits, although the latter materials cannot presently be installed, The most recent online exhibit is on the Wood River Refinery, which celebrated its centennial anniversary in 2019. A picture from the exhibit is shown below. Museum curators continue to research materials which will be used in the new museum.



Madison County Historical Museum building as of the end of April. (Jon Parkin)

Roxana Petroleum construction circa 1917-1918. Note the workhorses in the foreground. (MCHS)

MCHS News

MCHS Expands Online Presence

With all facilities closed to the public, the MCHS is placing more material on the Society's website. In addition



to the new online exhibit by staff (see page two), the Society has added more archived newsletters and plans to

place additional resources online in the coming months. The website can be found at https://madcohistory.org/ where readers can explore Madison County history. Have ideas for website materials? Call 618-656-1294. We're always happy to hear from members.

SUMMER PROGRAMS CANCELED

Due to COVID-19 concerns, the Madison County Historical Society has canceled all programming through the end of July, including the June Speaker Series program. The April and June programs have already been rescheduled for the same months in 2021.

Programs previously announced for late summer and fall will be assessed at a later date to determine whether they can be held safely. The status of these events will be announced in the July MCHS newsletter as well as in local newspapers and on Facebook. For more information, call 618-656-1294.

MCHS BOARD HAS VIRTUAL MEETING

After canceling the March meeting of the Madison County Historical Society Board of Directors, it was determined that there was too much happening to skip a second meeting. Since the Board couldn't meet in person, for the first time in 99 years, there was a virtual meeting, something Society founders could never have imagined! The meeting was held via Zoom and attendance was excellent!

It's good to know that modern technology allows the Society to continue the work of preserving Madison County history and making it available to everyone.

MCHS SHOWCASED ON FACEBOOK

The Society's Facebook page, "Madison County Historical Society," offers a variety of posts about local history which usually include historic photographs. Recent posts which have proved popular were photographs of the historic Nickel Plate Station in Edwardsville moving to its new location, a charming WW II story by MCHS member Marilyn Sulc and photographs of May Day celebrations in the Village of Leclaire. Below are samples of photographs that can be seen on Facebook.



Above: The Nickel Plate Station in Edwardsville on the move. After renovation, the historic structure will become part of the Edwardsville Children's Museum. (Reinhardt).



2020 NEW AND RENEWING MEMBERS

March - April ◆ Thank you for supporting MCHS!

\$100 Patron/Corporate

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To Join or renew MCHS membership, go to https://madcohistory.org/membership/ or send a check to MCHS, P. O. Box 422, Edwardsville, IL 62025.

ROLAND HARRIS (CONT. FROM PAGE 1)



Roland 's mother Maybelle and her parents, John and Annie (Mulloy) Willman who ran the East End Hotel and Saloon in Alhambra

Paul's Catholic High School. Roland decided on St, Paul's, but only attended for a day. The schedule at St. Paul's placed him in an English Literature class he had already taken (and disliked) in Alhambra. He immediately transferred to Highland's public high school, but not before meeting the girl who would eventually become his wife, Lorna Ritt.

Lorna was a pretty sophomore and he was a senior when (Luke Harris) they met, but they wouldn't have their first date until the

following summer, July 4, 1943. A few months later, their courtship was interrupted by Roland's World War II service, during which Lorna wrote to him every day. When asked if he still had their letters, Roland said it was ironic for

someone who saves everything, but his mother accidently discarded his letters from Lorna, and her mother mistakenly threw away Lorna's letters from him. They married on June 17, 1947, a year after Roland was discharged from the Army. Almost 73 years later, after raising four children, they are still enjoying married life.

Following his 1943 high school graduation, Roland was still only 17 so ineligible for the draft. He immediately began classes in engineering at Jefferson College in St. Louis, while working days painting railroad signals. Every day, his mother drove him to Hamel where he caught the Illinois Terminal (ITS) that delivered him to classes. In July, he turned 18 and by October had been drafted. The Draft Board allowed him to delay entry so he could finish the semester, but on Nov. 16, 1943, he entered the U. S. Army.

The first few months he spent in training and after completion was given a rank of corporal with the job of training men to use 105 howitzers with the 98th field artillery battalion. In December 1944, he left the United States bound for the Philippines. He at first continued training troops on the howitzer, then had a few weeks of combat before the war came to an end. After that, his battalion was charged with processing U. S. soldiers who had been Japanese prisoners. Roland said that even second hand, the stories of the many atrocities the prisoners had lived through could cause nightmares. He was relieved when he was made an acting first sergeant in charge of those conducting the interviews and no longer had to hear them directly from the former prisoners.

He left the Philippines on April 1, 1946, and on April 21, an Easter Sunday, he was discharged from the Army.

After returning from the war, Roland found there was a glut of engineers, so decided to go into the funeral home business. He found a job, beginning May 1, with "Uncle Ed and Aunt Louise" at the Schneider Funeral Home in Edwardsville. Ed and Louise were not his biological aunt and uncle; however Ed's brother, William Schneider,



Roland's parents, Irwin and Maybelle (Willman) Harris. (Luke Harris)

was married to Roland's aunt. All of them lived in Alhambra so they knew each other well and shared family gatherings.

Roland attended the St. Louis College of Mortuary Science while working for Schneiders, commuting with three other Madison County students, Vernon Stahlhut, Gus Hughes, and Sid Gent. Gent, fortunately, had a car and was willing to take passengers.

Roland graduated on June 11, 1947, and married Lorna six days later. He worked in Edwardsville, living with the Schneiders at the funeral home the first year, then renting a house nearby after his marriage. In September 1948, after nearly three years in Edwardsville, Roland and Lorna returned to Highland where Roland found a job at Tibbett's Funeral Chapel and Furniture Store. Tibbett's had been in business under several different names since 1870, always as a combination furniture and funeral business, which was common in those days.

The following year, in 1949, Berns Duane Tibbett had a stroke, and Roland was placed in charge of the business. In 1950, Roland began purchasing the firm and by 1953 was the sole owner. In 1955, the name of the business, was changed to Roland Harris Funeral Chapel and the Roland Harris Furniture Store.

Soon afterwards, Roland purchased the Bardill House at 920 Ninth Street, the

former home of Josias Bardill who at different times was elected mayor of Highland, state representative, and state senator. Bardill built the house, some might call a mansion, in 1911. The Harris Funeral Chapel opened in the Bardill Home in April 1957. The significance of this is that for the first time, the funeral and furniture businesses were separated.

Home in April 1957. The significance of this is that for the first time, the funeral and furniture businesses were separated.

In 1962, he sold the furniture business to focus on the funeral home, which also included an ambulance service. Ten years earlier, he purchased two ambulances. A competing funeral home in town bought one, and that put a considerable dent in Roland's business. If the person picked up by ambulance was already deceased, it cost extra to deliver them to a different funeral home.



Roland and Lorna (Ritt) Harris, June 17,1947. (Luke Harris)

continued page 7

ROLAND HARRIS: THE HISTORIAN

Early in his marriage Roland began collecting artifacts and stories about Highland and the small surrounding communities of Alhambra, Grantfork, Jamestown, Marine, New Douglas, Pierron, Sebstapol, and St. Jacob. In 1956, on the advice of Jules Spindler, he began writing a weekly newspaper column about the history of the area. People began bringing things to him and relating stories of their families. He added some display cases at the funeral home to hold a few of the items, which his wife, Lorna, then called his "Highland junk." (She now calls them his Highland "memorrobilis" but can be excused for not an

"memorabilia," but can be excused for not appreciating the collection while trying to keep a neat house with four boys.)

In 1971, Roland gathered some likeminded friends and together they organized the Highland Historical Society. They had an inauspicious beginning. Their first project was to restore an old Swiss barn near Highland. The group raised the funds needed and had almost completed the new roof when a tornado came through and destroyed the barn. Undaunted, the group remains an active organization today.

Roland discontinued his newspaper column in 1977, when he began restoring old cemeteries. He organized friends and family to assist in saving nine area cemeteries.

The writing bug returned in 1999 when Alhambra celebrated its sesquicentennial. Roland and his mother did much of the research and writing for Alhambra's commemorative book. With that work, he realized there were many more stories to tell, stories that needed to be remembered. In 2000, he revived "A Thought to Remember" and continues to write his weekly column today. More than 2,000 articles over 40 years in the *Highland News Leader* have taught local families about their heritage and reminded old-timers of precious memories.

Meanwhile, the Highland Historical Society (HSS) took on additional projects. Pet Milk donated the Louis Latzer home to the organization in 1977. Since then, Roland has often portrait Louis Latzer, even wearing a suit that belonged to Mr. Latzer for tours of the property or at fundraisers. Each year, in

September, HHS hosts Latzer Homestead Harvest Days where visitors can enjoy tours, demonstrations, great food and numerous exhibits. Special programs are offered to area school children at what the HHS calls "20 acres of fun and history." The organization was also active in planning the Highland Sesquicentennial in 1987.

In December 2014, Roland and Lorna moved to the Highland Home, a Highland retirement center that has been in business since 1912. After moving in, Roland reached an agreement which allowed him to lease unused rooms in the old part of the building for a museum to house his artifacts. Since the Highland Historical Museum opened in April 2016, it has grown to include over 7,000 artifacts in six rooms.

Early on, Lorna was the museum's typist, making a record of each artifact, while Roland worked with 11 other volunteers to create the exhibits. The museum (when there is not a pandemic in process) is open by appointment with tours usually led by Roland.

The ISHS Lifetime Achievement Award is given to people who have worked over the course of their lives to preserve Illinois history. Few have done as much as Roland Harris. It's no wonder that whenever there is a question about Highland history, the first response in Highland is usu-



The above photographs are from the Highland Historical Museum. Top left shows Roland pointing to a photo of his great-great-grandfather, Jonathan Mulkey Harris. The museum has many framed collections of photographs donated by area residents. Top right is a Highland exhibit including a portrait of Louis Latzer. Bottom right shows part of a hallway connecting the rooms. Every surface has materials that are sorted by community. Bottom left shows exhibits in the Highland room. (Reinhardt)

ally, "Have you talked to Roland Harris?" In gratitude for his years of work to preserve the community's heritage, the city recently named a pavilion at Silver Lake Park in his honor. That honor is more appropriate than they might know, since below the waters of Silver Lake is an old family cemetery containing the remains of some of Roland's early Madison County ancestors.

Roland has not yet received the physical evidence of his award from the Illinois State Historical Society. The award was scheduled to be presented on April 24, but the ceremony had to be postponed due to COVID-19. ISHS hopes the opportunity to present the handsome award which goes along with this recognition will soon be possible.

CURTISS BLAKEMAN: A SEA CAPTAIN EMIGRATES TO ILLINOIS

When examining Roland's family tree for Madison County history, one of the first things that becomes clear is that many of his ancestors go back to pioneer days. In the past, membership in the Madison County Old Settler's Association was determined by whether they came to Madison County before the year of the Big Snow in 1830-31. There are many "snowbirds," as they were known, in Roland's family. On his father's side of the family six out of eight of his great-great-grandparents could have been members, with some arriving before Illinois became a state. His maternal ancestors also arrived early; all were here before the end of the Civil War.

From the New York Daily Advertiser, May 1818 -

"Emigration — A caravan consisting of covered wagons, drawn by two, three or four horses each, two coaches, a number of out-riding horses and about 120 persons, composing the expedition under Captains Blakeman and (Rowland P.) Allen for the state of Illinois, crossed the Pawles' Hook Ferry on its way to the West. These two gentlemen, having been for a number of years engaged as shipmasters in the Chinese trade and made handsome fortunes, have now turned their attention to the fertile plains of Illinois and have commenced the forming of a settlement there on their extensive purchase. The present caravan forms the first division. In the autumn the second division marches, and in the spring following the third division, which is to complete the establishment, will advance.

"In the company which passed here yesterday there were farmers, carpenters, blacksmiths, wheelwrights, masons, coopers, etc., with their families, mostly natives of the Northern hive; all their equipments were in fine order and the emigrants in fine spirits."

Since there is limited space in this newsletter, the focus here will be on Roland's most notable ancestor, Curtiss Blakeman Sr. and his family. Blakeman was a Connecticut sea captain, born in Stratford in 1777. He went to sea at a young age and through hard work found his way to the position of captain. In 1799, he married Lavinia Meade and the couple lived in New York for a few years before moving to Bridgeport, Connecticut.

Bridgeport was a seaport and in the early years of the 19th century Blakeman became master of a new 320-ton ship called the Triton. Following that, in 1805, he became master of another new ship, the Trident. Just the fact that this young man, not yet 30, would be given commissions over these expensive vessels is testament to his skill and reliability. He sailed often to Europe as well as to China with journeys especially difficult during the War of 1812, when American ships were not safe from the British.

In 1818, at the age of 42, Captain Blakeman returned from what would be his last voyage. Blakeman and a group of other sea captains decided to move west and take up farming. The former sea captains, some who had purchased property east of Edwardsville as early as 1816, had their first view of the land when they arrived in 1818-19. Curtiss Blakeman is credited with laying out a town, briefly called Madison, that became known as the Marine Settlement, two miles south of present day Marine.

Blakeman, who previously plowed the seas, now worked to break the prairie and immersed himself in his new occupation. In 1822, he was the first president of the Madison County Agricultural Association. According to the 1812 county history, he was not a political man, but became a state representative because he wanted to promote the cause of abolition. In June1823, he became the first president of the Madison Association, a group formed in Edwardsville to oppose the introduction of slavery in Illinois. He was elected as a state representative in the same election that in 1822 elected Madison County resident Edward Coles as governor. He served two terms in the legislature. He also served as a justice of the peace for many years.

Blakeman and his first wife, Lavinia Mead, had 11 children, nine born in the East, before Lavinia died in 1821. Only five of those children survived to adulthood. Blakeman remarried in 1823 and had four additional children. In 1832 a cholera epidemic swept through St. Louis. The following spring, one of Blakeman's employees, returning from a trip to St. Louis, became ill and died. Shortly afterward, the disease spread to the Blakeman household where Blakeman, his wife and one of his children all died from cholera within a few days of each other.

They are buried in Marine Cemetery on the grounds of the original Union Church. That property, then part of Marine Settlement, was donated by Blakeman in 1821.



Marker at Marine Cemetery reads in part: In memory of Capt. Curtiss Blakeman and the Marine Settlement; Just north of here, in 1819, a group of sea captains, Blakeman, Allen, Breath, Diselherst and Mead from Connecticut, arrived and built log cabins, naming the settlement Marine. (Reinhardt)

THE BLAKEMAN CHILDREN AND OTHER DESCENDANTS

The most prominent among the Blakeman children is Curtiss Blakeman, Jr. (1807-1875) who was always referred to as "Captain" Blakeman in respect to his service in the Civil War. He was a captain in Company G of the 117th Illinois Infantry. Two decades after his father first served in the state legislature, Captain Blakeman was elected to serve in the same position. He also was elected to two two-year terms, although not consecutive (1842 and 1846). Again, following in his father's footsteps, he served for eight years as a justice of the peace.



Captain Curtiss Blakeman Jr. in his Civil War uniform and his wife, Sarah Reynolds Blakeman. (Luke Harris)

Both Blakemans established mills. A mill at Marine Settlement founded in 1823 by the elder Curtiss was destroyed by fire in 1835. The younger Curtiss established two mills, the Windmill in 1849 and, with partners John Parker and Jacob Spies, the well-known Cable Mill in 1866.

The younger Curtiss married Sarah Reynolds (1809-1858) who was the daughter of James B. Reynolds (1782-1854) who came to Illinois from Kentucky in 1818 with his parents. Reynolds settled just north of Highland. The 1882 county history said James was "an energetic and enterprising man, and began farming on a larger scale than was at that time usual...He introduced the new inventions as soon as they were thrown on the market."

Sarah's father, like her husband, also served as a state representative and as a justice of the peace. James Reynolds was one of the first to greet the contingent of Swiss immigrants who founded Highland, inviting them into

his home to share a meal. James' parents, Roland Harris' fourth greatgrandparents, are the Reynolds buried on their farm that now lies below Silver Lake.

Almost all the children of the elder Curtiss Blakeman (those who survived to adulthood) married into prominent Madison County families. Lavinia Blakeman married William Gerke, a family prominent in Marine and, later, in Edwardsville. Elizabeth married Michael Collins, one of the Collins brothers of Collinsville, and William married Nancy Sprague, daughter of one of the early

Highland families. Caroline and Marie married men whose families came from Connecticut with the Blakemans, Dr. George T. Allen and John Ferguson.



Most of the Roland and Lorna Harris family, taken in 2017. All are descendants of Madison County pioneers. (Luke Harris)

ROLAND HARRIS (CONT, FROM PAGE 4)



The former Harris Funeral Chapel in Highland (Luke Harris)

And that is how Roland came to add "ambulance driver" to his resume. He offered an ambulance service until 1972 when the Highland Fire Department took over that business.

In 1968 he added another title, "Deputy Coroner." In addition, Roland did work for other funeral homes because he had a reputation for excellence in restoration work in the case of car accidents or other injuries.

However, by 1976, Roland was having some health issues which affected his lungs. The trouble was attributed to the chemicals used in embalming. He sold the funeral home and started over with an entirely new career, this time in banking. He worked at Highland's First National Bank until his retirement in 1990 attaining the position of Assistant Vice President.

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TWO HARRIS CEMETERIES IN MADISON COUNTY



There are two cemeteries named for the Harris family in Madison County. The oldest is south of Troy in Jarvis Township and has the graves of Roland's great great grandparents, Benjamin Proctor Harris (1777-1853) and Margaret (DeMint) Harris (1781-1837).

Roland's great grandfather, Jonathan Mulkey Harris (1822-1889) and his wife, Rachel Mills

At left is one of the older graves from Roland's family, Joseph Harris (1839-1840), son of Benjamin Harris. (Reinhardt) Harris (1825-1894) moved to Alhambra. An existing cemetery on their farm was donated to the community and renamed Harris Cemetery.

In addition to the two Harris cemeteries, there is another small family cemetery with members of Roland's family called the Mills/Watt Cemetery. This cemetery, holding the remains of Rachel Mills Harris's parents and other relatives, is also in Jarvis County, not far from the Harris Cemetery. All three cemeteries have some graves with dates well before the Civil War.

Roland's love of history may have started at the Harris Cemetery in Alhambra where, as a young child, his dad charged him with trimming around the tombstones with a scissors. When he was 12, his father bought him an official grass trimming shears, and by the time he was 14, he was mowing the entire cemetery.

EDITOR'S RESEARCH TIP

For successful historical research, sources are the most important items in a writer's toolbox. I will rarely recommend that readers purchase a product, but there is one that I use often when researching Madison County history. It is a USB

ANNOUNCEMENT!

DUE TO COVID-19, THE ARCHIVAL LIBRARY IS CLOSED TO THE PUBLIC ALL MCHS EVENTS HAVE BEEN CANCELED THROUGH JULY! cles about Illinois.
There are many county histories, including the 1866 Gazetteer of Madison County and

the 1882 History of Madison County. The Archival Library has hard copies of these books, but with the digital version there is one that I use unty history. It is a USB drive loaded with out-of-print books and arti-

This is also a good product for those that just want to read more about Illinois history.

The USB drive is available on eBay for \$11.95. To find it, search for Illinois genealogy.