



MCHS BUILDING HISTORY

659 Chapman Street - Edwardsville, IL

By Cindy Reinhardt, 2016

The James Burke House

The brick home at 659 Chapman Street was built on a five-acre tract of ground purchased by James Burke from the estate of Erastus Wheeler in 1859. Burke was a bricklayer, and it is probable that he built the L-shaped Greek Revival home himself. The original portion of the house featured a center door and six over six double hung windows with beautiful original glass held in place by delicate muntins.

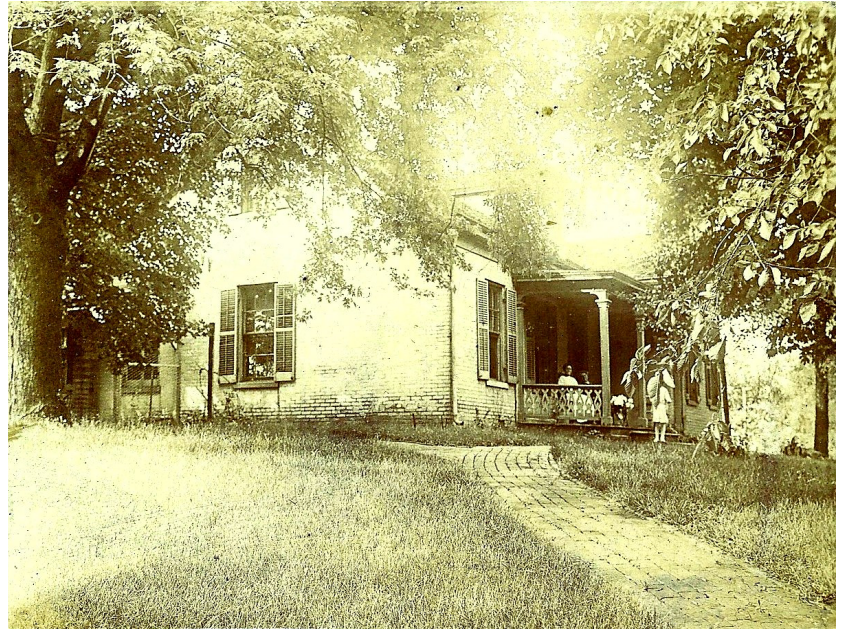
Burke was born in 1833 in Galway, Ireland, and came to America with his family in 1851. The family settled in Massachusetts, where they remained except for James who moved west to Edwardsville. In 1855, he married Bridget Reedy, also an Irish immigrant, born in County Mayo. In 1858, their only child to survive to adulthood, Mary Jane, was born at their home on St. Louis Street. This was at a time long before St. Louis Street was known for its grand homes.

After finishing his home on what would become Chapman Street, Burke was recruited as a volunteer in Company H of the Illinois 150th Infantry which consisted of mostly Madison County men. It was a one-year enlistment, beginning in February, 1865. Gen. Robert E. Lee surrendered to Gen. Ulysses S. Grant just two months later, but Company H continued to serve in garrisons in Tennessee and Georgia until being mustered out in January 1866 from Atlanta. Although the war was nearly over, Burke's service was not without danger. Fifty-eight men in the company died of disease.

Burke sold the Chapman Street property in 1876 to another Civil War veteran, Thomas Newsham. Bridget Burke died in 1897, and James remarried later that year. He died in 1903. In Burke's obituary, the Dec. 11, 1903, issue of the *Edwardsville Intelligencer* said the fact that this old settler "performed manual labor with his hands did not prevent Mr. Burke from developing into a financier. He was continually figuring good investments and then carrying them out, and a great amount of property has passed through his hands." The newspaper then referred to an entire block near the "uptown depot," that is, on the above-mentioned St. Louis Street, and mentioned the five acres on Chapman Street.

Thomas Newsham moved to the house on Chapman Street with his wife and their three daughters, including Bessie, who etched her name in the glass of a window in the front parlor which can still be read more than a century later.

Thomas, born in England in 1832, immigrated with his parents to Monroe County, Illinois, when a young boy. He was left an orphan at the age of 13 at which time he moved to St. Louis where he became a carpenter's apprentice until going into business for himself at the age of 18. In 1850, he moved to



The Vollrath/Gerke family on the front porch of 659 Chapman Street circa 1900. (Courtesy of Jay Kelleher)

Edwardsville where in 1858 he married Mary Jane Eaton, the daughter of early Madison County pioneers. She was born in Edwardsville in 1838.

Maj. Thomas Newsham's Civil War service was more illustrious than that of Pvt. James Burke. Newsham entered the service in 1861, and, except for a break due to illness, served until April 1864. A lengthy description of his military career in the 1882 *History of Madison County, Illinois*, said, "...he was the trusted and confidential aid and comrade of men who then and since have grown great...He was selected by Gen. Grant as bearer of dispatches from headquarters to Washington."

Listed on his military draft documents as an architect, Newsham was a well-respected building contractor responsible for many Edwardsville homes and businesses. He organized local GAR (Grand Army of the Republic) reunions after the war and in his later years served as a land agent for the federal government.

The Newshams owned the house on Chapman St. from 1876 to 1887 when it was sold to Valentine Vollrath, and the Newshams moved to a new home in "the West End" which at that time usually referred to St. Louis Street.

Vollrath was a Marine-area farmer, and although he and his wife, Elizabeth, still had children at home, their financial situation allowed him to retire to a new home at the county seat. Like the Newsham family, the Vollraths could afford house servants and regularly hosted entertainments at their home.



At left, the Valentine Vollrath family; Second from left in back is Jacob Vollrath; Lower right in front Matilda Vollrath (later Gerke); Parents Valentine and Elizabeth Killion Vollrath; Circa 1885. Above is Mathilda, Henry and Betty Gerke with friends at their home at 659 Chapman Street, Edwardsville, IL .(Courtesy of Jay Kelleher)

Valentine Vollrath immigrated to the United States from Prussia in 1848 on a ship called the Mayflower. Not THE Mayflower, of course. This Mayflower sailed to New Orleans. Vollrath made his way north to Quincy, Illinois where he set up a business in his trade as a cooper. A few years later he relocated to Belleville where he met Elizabeth Kilian, also a German immigrant. They married in 1852 and the following year their son, John, was born, followed by six daughters, Anna, Matilda, Eleanor, Elizabeth, Emma, and Minnie.

The family moved to Madison County in 1860 where Valentine took over management of a large farm near Marine. At the end of his career, he purchased and ran his own farm before retiring to the house on Chapman Street with his wife and four unmarried daughters. The daughters would all marry within ten years, and all, as was commonly noted a century ago, “married well.”

It is not known if the house was enlarged by Newsham or Vollrath, but according to architect Jennifer Plocher Wilkins, “At some point, likely in the 1880s or 90s, the house was expanded in the Victorian style. The addition was on the east side

of the house with a front-facing gabled roof, and the front door was shifted over to a window bay of the original house to be at the center of the expanded footprint. The addition has four-over-four double-hung windows with wider muntins typical of the period, though the roof line and eave returns which are indicative of Greek Revival house were continued. A front and side porch which was part of the Victorian building campaign has been lost, but it appears in historic photos. An enclosed back porch nearly the full width of the house is also an early feature.”

After Valentine Vollrath’s death in 1897, the property was purchased by his daughter Matilda and her husband, Henry C. Gerke. They continued a tradition of graceful living on the hill above Chapman Street until moving to a home on St. Louis Street in 1921.

There have been a number of owners since then, and the house had fallen on hard times until purchased by the current owners who are, slowly but steadily, bringing this historic house back to its glory days when it was the home of Edwardsville’s most elite families.

