

**Original Universalist Church/Arthur Stark/
Nancy Seymour Heatley –
Currently Riley Oncken Law Offices
212 South Main Street**



This property is certainly a stunning place for either a business or a home, but it hasn't always been so. It had quite humble beginnings as the first permanent home for the Universalist Church, built in 1855. When first constructed, it was a single story, simple building. It has since had a number of owners: some who took great care of it and others who let it run down a bit. However, it has managed to maintain its beauty through all the years. Although, it has been completely renovated several times, there is still evidence of the original church, most especially seen in the first-floor windows and the heavy front door.

The Universalists were important to the history of Sycamore as many in the congregation, and several deacons were quite involved in the Underground Railroad. Sycamore was a key stop along the journey, and these “conductors” were an important part of that system, ferrying escaped slaves onward to Geneva and St. Charles and eventually to Chicago and Lake Michigan where they could then travel to Canada and freedom. That humble-yet-important, church still lies within the walls of the beautiful building you see today. We're sure there are many stories it could tell.

As you enter the front door, stop to note how old and heavy that door is. Although we aren't sure if it comes from the original church, it is at least old enough to be from the first major renovation, undertaken by Arthur Stark when he bought the structure in 1875 after the Universalists built a grand new church on West State Street, the building most recently known as the Midwest Museum of Natural History. Stark worked as secretary at the Marsh Harvester factory, one of the earliest manufacturers in Sycamore. He is the one responsible for creating the two-story Italianate structure you see today. He also added many of the grand touches found throughout the home, starting with the foyer here, which has a fine example of intricate inlaid flooring. Also, the framed original charter for the Universalist Church hangs proudly on the wall.

As you move into the reception area, you will see a beautiful chandelier above Riley Oncken's reception desk. Riley is the local lawyer who is the current owner of the building. He has done a masterful job of adding only what was needed to make the former home workable as an office space while respecting all the original design features still there. The best story is why there is now a spoon in the cord suspending that front chandelier. When Riley's office staff lined up on the stairs to take a group picture, the photographer couldn't get the shot because the chandelier hung too low and was in the way, so the spoon was the solution to shorten the chain!

Next, we take you through the door to the right and into Riley's office. Here, please stop to admire the lovely clock in the front corner. Also note the lovely old leaded glass door. In this office you'll also find an ivory-colored marble fireplace, also probably dating back to Arthur Stark's time. Even the door hinges here are decorative. This room is quite spectacular and serves Riley nicely as an office.

The room behind the office was a dining room and is now a conference room. It sports more of those intricate inlaid floors. Also, the elegant chandelier in here belonged to Riley

Oncken's grandmother, adding his family heritage to this historic space. You'll also want to stop and take a peek at the large, luxurious bathroom in the back. Returning to the front, we invite you now to go up to the second floor to see more of the majesty of this property.

On the way upstairs, stop to admire the intricately carved newel post. The hall upstairs opens into several offices, all quite nicely appointed. The office in the front left corner contains the panel for an antiquated security system, no longer in use. Quite an interesting touch! Note throughout these offices more of the inlaid floors and some elegant old rugs. Many of these floors are original to the 1875 reconstruction of the home when the second story was added. In the office on the right further down the hall stands a lovely old stove. Toward the back, you'll find another spectacular bathroom. As you return to the lower level, make sure to notice the unusual round globe chandelier over the stairs.

There is even more to this house and more history as you make your way to the back part of the house. The recent renovations here were accomplished by Nancy Seymour Heatley, the daughter of Ed Seymour of Sycamore, inventor of the aerosol sprayer for paint. Nancy had the beautiful custom kitchen installed as well as the apartment beyond the kitchen for her and her dogs. The most interesting feature in the kitchen is the island fabricated from a hardware store counter. Also, the brick you see on the front wall of the kitchen was the original outside wall of the church!

As you pass through the hallway to the back sitting room, you'll see an unusual installation—a doggie spa. Nancy loved her dogs but didn't like the mess they made when they came in the house, so she had this spa installed, complete with shower for her pets. The sitting room/bedroom was designed for Nancy who could no longer go upstairs. The bathroom here is spacious and designed for the elderly lady. Sadly, she passed away not long after she moved into her new space and did not get to enjoy it long.

Even the backyard here is interesting. First there is an inviting patio area, perfect for outdoor entertaining. Beyond that is a huge garage, now used for storage. But if you look closely at the grass in the backyard, you'll see it is not grass at all but Astroturf. Nancy had it installed so that the dogs did not tear up the grass and again, did not bring a mess into the house. We invite you to exit through the backyard and the gate toward the front where you can get a close look at the lower story windows from that important old church whose essence is still in this property.



**Abraham and Sarah Ellwood House/
My Insurance Guy/Crain-Bruch Financial Services
204 South Main Street**

The stately home on the corner of Elm and Main Streets was built by the father of one of the most important families in the early history of DeKalb County—Abraham Ellwood. Abraham came to Sycamore in 1856 at the age of 64; his wife Sarah was 61. They came here to join two daughters and six sons who were already well established in Sycamore and DeKalb. In total, they had 11 children. All of their children who resided here made significant

contributions to Sycamore: Rueben as our first mayor and a congressman from Illinois; Chauncey was instrumental in bringing the railroad to Sycamore and getting the depot built; James was postmaster and businessman; Alonzo built the Central Block building downtown with his brothers; and Alida Ellwood Young, known for the large downtown building named in her honor, the Alida Young Temple. And of course, Isaac Ellwood, barbed-wire baron, made major contributions to DeKalb and to the world. For his part, Abraham was an excellent cooper, building a shop on the back of this property to make butter tubs and hogshead barrels.

This home was built on a grand scale and was definitely designed for entertaining for the Ellwoods as leaders of the community. Although now serving as office spaces, many of the fine design elements are still apparent in this house. As you enter, the first thing you'll see is a nice leaded glass window, which is vintage, in a great new door. Then you will be struck by the exquisite bannisters surrounding the stairway. Beautifully kept up and painted, the woodworking frames the stairs, both at the bottom with the bannisters and hanging from the top. It's quite a striking feature, inviting you to go upstairs.

In fact, we begin our tour by mounting those stairs. At the top, if you turn to your left, you'll pass by some nicely appointed offices and pass into a hallway with original built-in shelves. On this side, there is a waiting room with a great view of the street below and then a small kitchen. On the backside is a nice balcony overlooking the backyard where Abraham had his shop. There is an open stairway here, granting direct access to the yard. Returning to the front, you'll pass a nice conference room and a small, pretty bathroom.

Back down the stairs and to the left, you'll enter a large reception area, beautifully decorated. The best feature is the inviting window seat in front of the bay window that looks out on Elm Street. And the window glass here is original! To your left is a small room that was called the Piano Room. The piano that once resided here was known to be played by several well-known locals. Now, the room is a conference room which boasts the lovely picture window that looks out at Main Street.

Behind the reception desk is the main business office and a tiny bathroom. The waiting room on the side has inviting seating and leads to the offices in the hallway. Take a peek out the back door on the right to get a glimpse of the original siding that is visible in a small enclosed porch. Beyond the final office in the back is a bathroom and then the larger back porch. There is access to the basement from here as well as that famous backyard where Abraham Ellwood once worked. To exit, either use the back stairs and exit on to Elm Street or come back through the house and out through that lovely foyer. Listen for the sounds of the piano and the crowd of Sycamore founders gathered in the front parlors!

Daniel B. James House/John Heuer/Turner Law Group
107 West Exchange Street

The property on the northwest corner of West Exchange and North Main Streets is steeped in the practice of law. First built in 1858 by Daniel B. James, attorney, justice, county judge, and postmaster, it has also been the home of several other important lawyers in Sycamore. It went through several other owners, but in 1964, John Heuer, a well-known local attorney bought the house and turned it into his offices. He practiced law here for over 20 years. He had his offices downstairs and kept an apartment upstairs for those times when the snow was too deep, or he worked too late to make it home. Since the mid-1980s, Rick Turner, local attorney, has housed his law practice here.



There are some great stories surrounding this property. Before D. B. James purchased this property, there was a small house located here that had been used as a saloon. Evidently, on the 4th of July in 1858, according to the *Sycamore True Republican* “fireballs were thrown up and about, serving as a very good substitute for skyrocket. One of these happened to come down on this building, when it, with its composite business, went up in fire and smoke.” The citizens of Sycamore were much pleased with this event, and even more pleased when D.B. James erected this lovely house on the spot.

D.B. James was an important addition to the town of Sycamore and to DeKalb County. He arrived in Sycamore in 1852 and formed a law partnership with the Honorable E.L. Mayo and later with Luther Lowell and Chauncey Ellwood. Along with building this home tucked right behind the courthouse square, D.B. erected the James Block in downtown Sycamore, now better known as George’s Block; renamed for Thomas George (his brother-in-law) who purchased the building in 1861. This building was a hotspot in downtown Sycamore, hosting many important speakers and entertainers, including Horace Greeley.

Framed by its striking jerkinhead roof, this home continues to be a showcase. Currently home to Turner Law Group, it has recently been expanded but has retained its charm. The new addition fits nearly seamlessly with the old and allows much more space and many updates inside. It is now totally handicapped accessible. Today, we invite you to enter through the front door (unless you need to use the ramp in the back for access) on West Exchange Street to experience the full charm of this stately building.

As you enter the front you will see a beautiful staircase with an unusual gold newel post cap. First, though, we invite you to enter the front parlor to the right, now the reception area. Originally, this room had French doors opening behind the reception desk into the office behind, which would have originally been the second parlor. This front parlor does retain the original fireplace: a beautifully detailed, ivory-colored marble specimen, remarkably similar to the one found in 212 South Main Street. The lawyers in Sycamore have good taste in fireplaces!

Moving toward the back along the hallway, you will first pass the large, well-organized office on the right. This room was the office for John Heuer, whose clients entered through the French doors. Remodeled several times, this office is nicely arranged with attractive furnishings.

On the opposite side of the hall, you’ll find two rooms that are necessary to modern businesses: the copy room and the breakroom. Again, while not original, they are well appointed.

Between them on the wall, stop to admire the framed drawing of the original house from D.B. James' time. Note that it had extensive porches on both levels and the tower in the rear, all parts that have been lost through renovations. Still, the main charms of the house have been retained.

As you pass the other offices, there will be the side exit with the ramp for those who need it, and then a newly installed elevator to access the second level. Rick Turner has also added a nice conference room and a beautiful office for himself in the latest expansion. The expansion has nearly doubled the size of the building, but it is so seamless that if you didn't know it was new, you couldn't tell. However, in order to accomplish the construction, the crew had to dig out the old basement and the original cistern to clear the space.

At the back, you may choose to go upstairs by either using the stairway or the elevator. On the second floor, you'll pass more offices, and if you look down more closely, you will see a slight bump in the floor which marks where the new part of the building begins. As these busy lawyers have many on-going cases, we ask you not to enter any offices.

The front part of this level was the apartment that John Heuer used in case of snowstorms. He even had a shower installed so he could stay over when needed. If you look closely, you will see the beautiful, original wood floors in the front room. It would have been a very cozy place to stay indeed, and so close to his work at the courthouse!

To exit, you may either go down the front stairs and out or you can return to the rear and use the elevator. Either way, pause to admire, once again, that beautiful, unusual staircase and newel post. Also, if you look at the top of the front door as you exit, you'll see a horseshoe hung with the open end up to keep the good luck in. This horseshoe was unearthed during the recent construction, so we can ponder a day when horses were tied up along the rail in front and people like the Ellwood brothers came to call on D.B. James.



**Townsend Carriage House/Gas
Station/Restaurant/Resource Bank
351 North Main Street**

Although we are only able to offer interior tours today until 1:00 p.m., we will be available at this location to showcase the exterior and the many stories that go with this

gem of a building until 5:00 p.m. This small-but-hugely-important property is tied to every era of Sycamore history, including the present. It has served as home to the first automobile in town, as a gas station, a Ford dealership, a restaurant in several forms, and finally, it has been recently transformed to serve as the Sycamore branch of Resource Bank. Through all of its incarnations, though, it has retained its distinct character and charm.

The building's unique rough stone construction matches the stately mansion on the hill above it, home of one of Sycamore's most important citizens, Frederick Townsend. He was born in 1858 on his family's farm near Malta. His grandfather, Daniel Pierce, was the founder of the Pierce Trust & Savings Bank, now known as Old National Bank, but long remembered in Sycamore as the National Bank & Trust Company. Frederick eventually became president of this important institution. In 1890, he married Mary Boynton, who grew up in the Boynton mansion next door. The beautiful Townsend mansion was a wedding gift to the couple from Mary's father, Charles Boynton. What a nice gift!

Frederick served Sycamore in many roles. He was an alderman and three-time mayor of Sycamore, a long-serving Sycamore township supervisor, and chairman of the Sycamore Municipal Hospital as well as the Sycamore Public Library board. In fact, he donated the land where the library now stands. Mary Boynton Townsend was also active in the civic and social life of Sycamore. She was a devout, life-long member of St. Peter's Episcopal Church, a member of the Sycamore Women's Club, and a charter member of the Dustin Chapter of the Order of Eastern Star and General John Stark Chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution. This couple's contributions to the community are indeed significant.

The building we are featuring was a carriage house, but it was never a stable for horses as most were. This lovely building was constructed in 1905 to house the first automobile in town. The first feature you see is the "hard heads" or boulders that comprise the outer walls. If you look closely, you'll see the unique pinkish-colored "roping" made of a special mixture of materials and rolled into long snakes as a filler between the stones. It is then wound around the boulders, mainly as a decorative element. Interestingly, Resource Bank could not find a current builder who knew how to accomplish this technique, but they wanted to be true to the origins of the construction, so they found a retired builder and brought him in to teach a current builder how to make and attach the roping. Even if you look closely, you cannot tell the difference between the old and the new. That is truly going above and beyond what is expected to retain the integrity of the structure.

At the front of the building, you will see a nod to the second incarnation of the property: two antique gas pumps. In 1927, F.E. Freeman, who bought the mansion and garage from the Townsends first converted it into a gas station. As the *Sycamore True Republican* wrote, "It will make the classiest oil station in this part of the country." That station stayed in business for many years. In 1937 the station also became Sycamore's Ford distributor, and it was once again

remodeled to make room for the Ford sales and service agency. However, through it all, the design elements and the beauty of the building were retained.

The next incarnation came in the 1980s when the quaint structure became a restaurant. Through the years, it had many names: the Towne Square, Grandma's, and the Main Street Café among them. As a popular restaurant, it saw a lot of changes, the windows above were sometimes covered, and a large restaurant kitchen was installed in the back.

Finally, in 2015, Richard Katz, president of Resource Bank purchased the building and renovated it into a bank, greatly honoring its origins. This restoration has been masterful! As you enter the building, note the expanded and much improved front porch and stairs. Those who ate at the restaurants may remember some precarious trips up and down narrow, oddly angled cement steps at the entry. Once inside, be sure to look up to see the wonderful beamed ceiling, uncovered in the re-construction.

Moving into the banking area, you will note another antique gas pump, a bit of whimsy, by the front desk. There will also be signs from old gas stations by the bathroom in the rear. In this central area, now completely opened up, you can see the lovely arched windows topped with a lovely diamond pattern. These windows are the original design from the carriage house. The back part of the building, which once contained the restaurant kitchen, is now an inviting conference room. The woodwork throughout is quite lovely. And the bathroom back here is certainly not a typical gas station bathroom.

Along the walls of the entire structure, please stop to admire many mounted pictures of the past days of Sycamore. Resource Bank has so respected the history of this property that Frederick and Mary Townsend might even consent to bring their business to Resource Bank as a thank you for the care this company showed in restoring their beloved carriage house!

**The DeKalb County History Center at the
Marshal Stark/Harold Engh Farm,
1730 North Main Street**

Sitting at the top of sweeping lawns surrounded by striking white plank fencing, the picturesque Engh Farm, now the home of the DeKalb County History Center, is one of the most historic properties in the county. Marshal Stark, the farmer who first developed this property, moved to Sycamore in 1835. This area became known as Stark Corners, one of the largest farms in DeKalb



County. He also served as sheriff of the county for two terms, School Commissioner, County Assessor, and for many years was in the position equivalent to being on the County Board. His obituary states that he was “earnest, public spirited, liberal and always thoughtful of the public welfare.”

In 1927, Harold and Helen Engh bought this farm and continued to develop it. This expansive farm soon became known to everyone in the county as Engh Corners. The Engh family, however, never lived on this property. They employed farm managers over the years to oversee the land and livestock. Harold Engh worked first for Illinois Wire and Cable Company, which merged to become Inland Wire Company and eventually at Anaconda Wire & Cable Company. He was then promoted to executive vice president and sent to manage the plant in New York. Consequently, the family split their time between New York and Sycamore, spending summers and vacations in Sycamore at their residence on Merry Oaks Drive. They also retained the Engh Corners farm, hiring farm managers to oversee its operation. After 17 years in New York, Engh left Anaconda and came back to Sycamore. In 1947, he took on the leadership of the Pyle-National Company in Chicago but eventually, in 1955, returned to work in Sycamore as president and later chair of the Turner Corporation until he died. His son, Harold Engh, Jr., known by all as “Bud,” worked at Pyle-National with his father. He eventually took over as president and Turner Corporation where he served for many years. His final career move was to found North American Plastics in Aurora, finally retiring from that company.

At this location, farm managers lived in the big house, and hired hands lived in the smaller house. Our records list the farm managers through the years as the following: 1932-1939, Simon Albrecht & Sons; 1939-1973, Harry Carlson; 1973-1982, R. Earl Reints; and from 1982 to 2007, Marvin Poliska. These families all kept detailed records of the farm. At various times, this property produced beef, hogs, dairy, sheep, horses, and even Airedale dogs as well as many types of crops. The land was broken up and sold off over the years to build the subdivisions that surround it now, and in 2007 a portion was donated to the City of Sycamore.

Today, we invite you to tour the small house where many farm workers lived over the years. It was later divided into separate rooms for renters. When the Sycamore History Museum moved here in May 2008, after the land was gifted to the City of Sycamore, the small house became the home to the offices and archives. The larger farm manager’s home also underwent renovations to accommodate the new museum space. This larger house was used as exhibit space and collection storage.

Then in March of 2018, the Sycamore History Museum and Joiner History Room combined to become the DeKalb County History Center with the mission to “Inspire curiosity in DeKalb County’s history.” May 11, 2019, marked the Grand Opening of the new building and featured a traveling Smithsonian exhibit *Crossroads: Change in Rural America*.

Our current exhibit *The History of DeKalb County in 100 Objects*, tells the story of our county through some of the most interesting objects in our collection as well as many on loan from other museums around the county. Fifty of the objects are at the History Center, and the other fifty can be found throughout the county. This exhibit uses objects to tell us stories about DeKalb County through four themes: “Daily Life,” “Change,” “Special Events,” and “Government.” This exhibit earned an Award of Excellence from the Illinois Association of Museums.

In addition to our changing exhibits, the History Center provides educational programming and much-anticipated special events, including such on-going programs as the monthly Brown Bag/Local Lore lunches, in partnership with the Ellwood House Museum. Additionally, researchers from near and far access the entire DeKalb County History Center Archives, working in the welcoming Joiner History Room with a professional archivist and talented volunteers to find missing clues connected to genealogy, property research, and other questions related to DeKalb County history.



Our website, dekalbcountyhistory.org, also offers information on many other museums around the county. For up-to-date information, watch the local newspapers, visit our website, sign up for our newsletter, and follow us on social media.