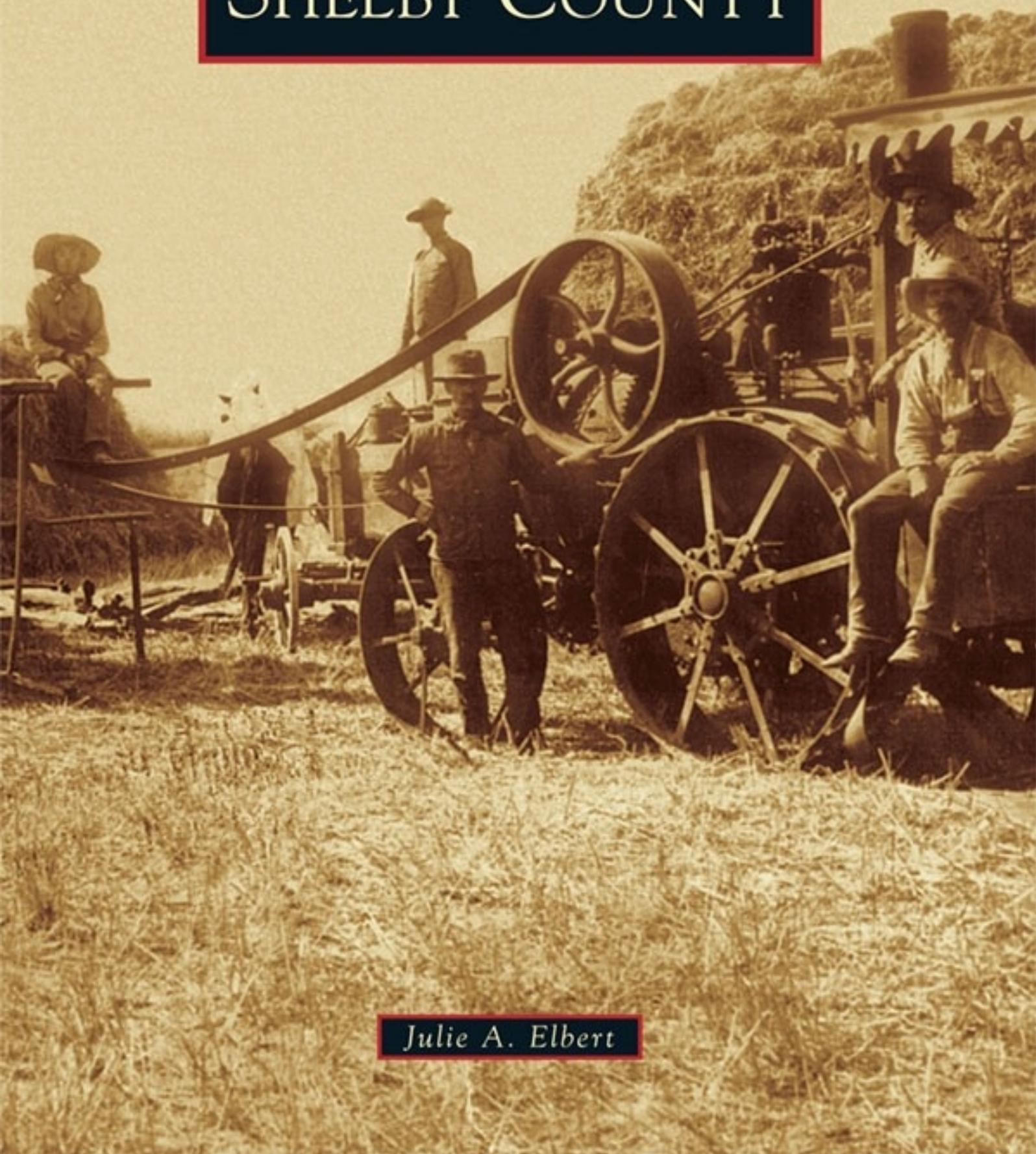
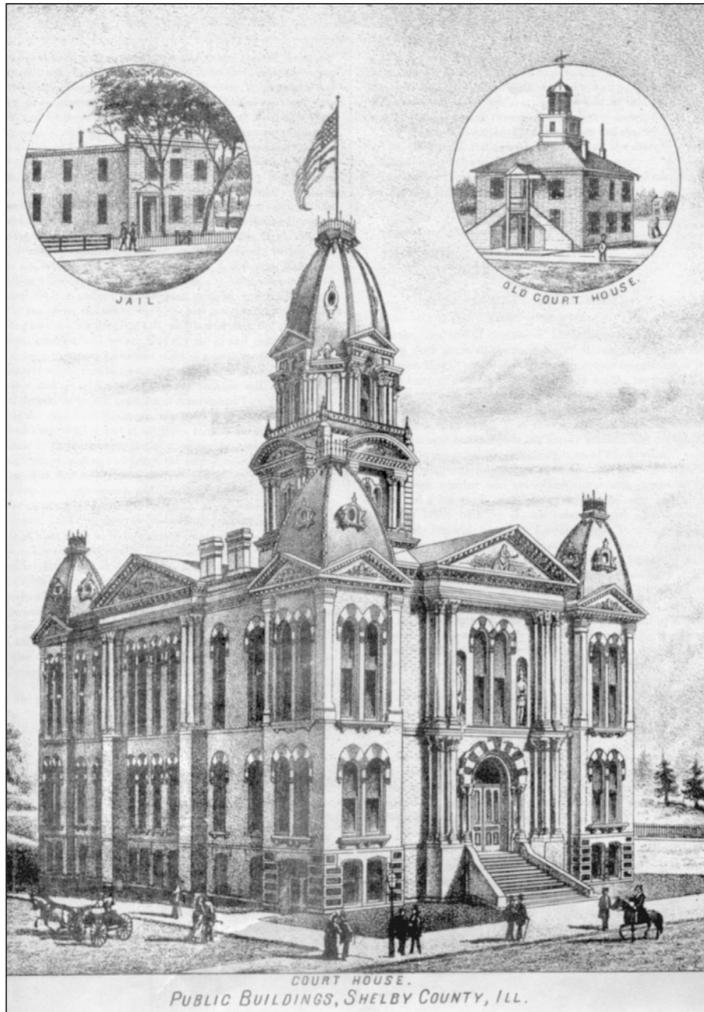


IMAGES
of America

SHELBY COUNTY



Julie A. Elbert



This is a drawing of the current courthouse as it looked not long after it was built. In addition there are insets of the second courthouse and the third jail. The inset shows the cupola on the second courthouse that was removed. The clocks have not been added yet to the third courthouse and the shingles are still slate. A set of pillars is missing on the front. The goddess above the doors is missing and its' location is unknown. The three pediments on each side of the courthouse have decorations in the tympanum or triangle within the pediment. The Goddess of Justice was in the triangle above the south door. It is difficult to see the decorations today that are easily seen in this drawing. This type of architecture is classical, Parthenon style.

ON THE COVER: This photograph was taken in 1918 at the Middlesworth Farm east of Tower Hill. The steam engine, resembling a tractor, furnished the power for the threshing machine. Wagons usually brought coal to run the engines. One of those wagons can be seen in the middle, just under the belt. The farmer was responsible for furnishing the coal, not the threshing crew. (Courtesy of the Shelby County Historical and Genealogical Society.)

Shelby County

Julie A. Elbert

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Dedicated to the people of Shelby County. The past and the present will shape the future of rural America.

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INTRODUCTION

Native Americans were the first known settlers of Shelby County. Many of the Native American names in Shelby are a testament to their influence in the county. These early Native Americans were Mound Builders and there is evidence that they were located near Williamsburg Hill. At the time there were buffalo herds and large herds of deer roaming the area. The Mound Builders were run out of the area by numerous individual warring tribes. In 1663, Louis Joliet and Jacques Marquette claimed territory for France. They called the area “Illinois Country.” In 1717, the territory of what will become the state of Illinois was annexed to the French Province of Louisiana. At the end of the French and Indian War in 1763, the British received “Illinois” as a result of the Treaty of Paris. In 1778, Gen. George Rogers Clark led the Illinois campaign to take over the British outposts during the Revolutionary War. With that success, it was called Illinois County, Virginia. In 1787, it became part of the Northwest Territory. In 1809, it was renamed the Illinois Territory.

In 1818, Illinois was admitted to the Union, and Shelby County was created on January 23, 1827. The county was named for Isaac Shelby, a soldier in the Revolutionary and Indian Wars. He was governor of Kentucky from 1792 to 1796 and from 1812 to 1816. In the War of 1812 Shelby commanded Kentucky troops in the Battle of Thames. In 1827 Shelby County contained most of present day Moultrie County, Pana, Assumption, and most of Prairieon Township in Christian County. In order to more accurately depict the 1827 version of Shelby County here is what happened; the present courthouse location on would have been in Knox County, Northwest Territory, St. Clair County of Territory of Indiana, Madison County Illinois Territory, Edwards County Illinois Territory, Crawford County Illinois Territory, Clark County State of Illinois, Fayette County, and finally Shelby County.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the county is 768 square miles of which 759 square miles are land and the remaining are water. Shelby County ranks 18th in size and 55th in population out of the 102 Illinois counties.

The settlement followed the geography of the county based on the needs of the settlers. The settlers needed dry land for their homes, a close water source, and forests nearby for hunting game. Cold Spring, Shelbyville, and Henton were those areas that first met these requirements. Later as farmers moved in, their needs changed and Moweaqua and Richland townships opened up. Railroads influenced the development of the county, rather the other way around. Swampy areas like Prairie Township were some of the last areas to be settled.

The first permanent settlement in Shelby County began on Williamsburg Hill in 1818 and was named Cold Spring. Tombstones for “H. O. Preston 1815” and “wife of

F. F. Donnell 1801” were found in this area. In order to keep wolves from the graves, large pieces of sandstone were placed on top of them, so the graves in this area are better preserved. At this time the three most prosperous villages were Cold Spring, Shelbyville, and Prairie Bird (Henton). There was quite a rivalry between Cold Spring and Shelbyville, as to which would be the dominant village in the county. The arrival of the railroad settled the contest in favor of Shelbyville and the Williamsburg community went into decline.

The first pioneer to settle in Moweaqua Township in 1831 was Jacob Traughber. There were few settlers, so they would get together to socialize by singing play songs and forfeit songs. The Moweaqua Centennial Booklet provides an example of a forfeit song: “The needles eye that doth supply, The thread that runs so truly through, How many a lass have I let pass, Because I wanted You.” Reading was a popular activity as well, but only three books were common—the Bible, Pilgrim’s Progress, and a hymnbook.

In the 1830s corn was 15¢ a bushel, wheat was 25¢ a bushel, hogs were 1¢ a pound, and cows sold for \$5. The style was different as well. Caps made of coon or squirrel skin were commonplace, and people were regarded as “well dressed” when they wore a buckskin shirt and pants with moccasins. The climate was somewhat different as well. The reflective properties of the thick prairie grass and timber were significantly different from the nearly bare soil of planted crops. This was also during the time known as the Little Ice Age that lasted from the 16th century to the 19th century. North America and Europe experienced colder winters with much heavier snowfall, which resulted in the snow staying on the ground for months.

Two important storms impacted the whole county. In the winter of 1830–1831, there was extremely deep snow. The snow began falling in December and continued throughout the winter. The snow was 4 or 5 feet deep, and for weeks everything was buried by snow. The snowfall was so extreme that livestock and even wildlife perished. In January 1836, the “sudden freeze” occurred when a Manitoba Wave swept in just after midday. Ponds and streams froze instantly. Boiling water thrown in the air came down as a sheet of ice. Meteorologically, a cold wave is when the temperature falls rapidly within a 24-hour period. The Manitoba Wave would be named after a cold area of the country, and the temperature would fall precipitously and almost instantly, in what is usually an unusual event. Under the proper conditions, water can freeze instantly, but recall from science class that boiling water freezes faster than cold water does. This is usually a way to demonstrate how cold it is,

The first reported settler in Richland Township was David Elliot in 1825. His brother John Elliot had twin daughters, and the Indians in the area were so fascinated by the girls that they built them a double papoose cradle. Pioneers cut trails from Centralia, north into central Illinois. Strasburg was built on the Grand Prairie Trail. Located in the middle of Strasburg, Richland Creek was a popular place to stop and water livestock. Some of the wagons that went on the Oregon Trail in 1847 passed through Strasburg. As the pioneers moved west, the Germans moved into the area in the 1850s.

The Southeastern part of Shelby County was one of the last areas to be settled.