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# COOK-WITTER REPORT

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## The Executive Mansion: A House and Its History

Governors may come and go, but for 154 years Illinois' Executive Mansion in Springfield has remained steadfast, weathering political and meteorologic storms. Completed in 1855, it's the oldest historic residence in Illinois and the third oldest executive mansion in the country.

During its long life the Mansion has served as a mirror, reflecting the personal tastes of its inhabitants and their time.

The Mansion was quiet during the Blagojevich administration, since former governor Rod Blagojevich lived in Chicago. But it has recently come to life again under current Governor Pat Quinn. During this legislative session so far, the Executive Mansion has hosted events for members of the Illinois House of Representatives, the Illinois Senate, the Illinois Legislative Black Caucus, the Illinois Legislative Latino Caucus, and an Easter egg hunt for special needs children, according to Mansion Curator David Bourland.

"It's been a little busier and a lot more fun," he says. "It's nice seeing the governor and the various leaders together having a good time. Trying to use the Mansion to promote good will is one of the things we really try to do."

When Democrat Joel Matteson, a wealthy Joliet entrepreneur elected governor in 1852, saw Illinois' first "Executive Mansion" he wasn't filled with good will. He, his wife and their seven children came to Springfield "and made a gloomy discovery," according to "At Home with Illinois Governors," by Dan Monroe with Lura Lynn Ryan (2002).

"The governor's home, at the corner of Eighth and Capitol, was a cramped structure that once housed the offices of the Illinois Board of Public Works," the book says. There was no yard and the house was not only too small for Matteson's brood,

but downright minuscule for the legislative receptions he planned. A commission, composed of Matteson and two others, decided the governor needed nicer digs, so the state built the Mansion for about \$50,000 at Edwards and Jackson streets in Springfield's elite "Aristocracy Hill" area. (The poet Vachel Lindsay's family later lived directly behind the Mansion.)

To mark the accomplishment, Governor Matteson and his wife, Mary, held a grand open house at the new Mansion on January 10, 1856. Unfortunately, it was a mostly "lights out" affair because icy temperatures froze the gas lights' pipes. But candles saved the night.

When the next governor, William H. Bissell, took office, ill health made him buck tradition and hold his inauguration at the Mansion, according to Monroe and Ryan's book. Bissell was a Republican and peer of Abraham Lincoln. His health worsened and in March, 1860 Bissell called close friends, including Lincoln, to his death bed for a last goodbye. The Mansion then turned into a funeral home as services were held in the Mansion for

the governor, whose body was kept there for visitation.

Just five years later, on May 4, 1865, the Mansion was put into solemn service again when then Governor Richard J. Oglesby welcomed state delegates who attended that day's funeral of Abraham Lincoln. Oglesby was a close friend of Lincoln's and the person who coined him the "rail-splitter candidate" during Lincoln's first presidential campaign, according to "Lincoln's Rail-Splitter: Governor Richard J. Oglesby," by Mark Plummer.

While the Mansion has seen its share of death, it's seen far more happy events, like wedding receptions for governors' children and the birth of Gover-



*In this circa 1880 photograph, you can see the Illinois Executive Mansion's original cupola, which no longer exists. Photo courtesy of the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum.*

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nor John L. Beveridge's granddaughter in October, 1874. Several presidents have visited it, including Ulysses S. Grant in 1874, Rutherford B. Hayes in 1879, and Herbert Hoover in 1931. Celebrities, like comedian Red Skelton and South African Archbishop Desmond Tutu, have been guests there as well.

At times, the Mansion has served as everything from a classroom to a theater to a USO for military personnel. In the mid 1880s, Governor Oglesby's wife, Emma, brought a festive and decidedly British feel to the Mansion. She had their children home schooled there in a room close to the cupola, which has since been removed. In the tradition of fine English society, she also held a Twelfth Night themed fundraiser for a local church. Guests were charged between twenty-five and fifty cents for admission (refreshments were additional) to watch "vocal lancers" and masked children perform, according to "At Home with Illinois Governors."

When he left the Mansion, Governor Oglesby kindly restocked the home's coal bins and left his cow for the next governor, Joseph W. Fifer. Animals were the passion of Florence Fifer, the governor's daughter (who later became Illinois' first female senator). This rambunctious youngster slid down the Mansion's banisters during her father's inaugural ball, rode her pony up the home's front stairs and into the hallway, and kept her young alligator in the fountain on the porch.

Many years and administrations later, the Mansion became a makeshift World War II USO during Governor Dwight H. Green's term. Springfield was a hotspot for soldiers on leave, so the Greens "opened the Executive Mansion to the USO and these patriotic men, staging lawn parties that featured music and dancing and delicious buffet suppers served by Mrs. Green and her comely daughters," write Monroe and Ryan.

Throughout the decades the now 50,000 square foot Mansion has had numerous restorations after falling into disrepair. (Bourland says it's overdue for one now.) It's even survived calls to tear it down. And, perhaps to no one's surprise, it's been a pawn in political salvos.

At the end of his third and last nonconsecutive gubernatorial term, Democrats accused Republican Governor Oglesby of "unlawful and extravagant" Mansion expenditures, according to the January 18, 1889 New York Times. Sen. Shumway from Christian County led the charge for an investigation. He said in

1885 and 1886 Oglesby spent \$18,764 on the Mansion, nearly the same amount as two years of Oglesby's salary (\$6,000 per year) and allotted expenses combined. While the Mansion's costs for those two years far exceeded previous years, Shumway said the Mansion was still in disrepair, and he jabbed at the recently moved Oglesby: "If custom establishes the right to extravagant and reckless waste of the people's money to such a degree that it now takes four large freight cars to move an outgoing Governor, how long will it be until a whole freight train will be required to vacate the Executive Mansion?"

In 1972, the nonprofit Illinois Executive Mansion Association was organized to "promote and preserve the historical integrity of the Executive Mansion," according to the Mansion's web site ([www.Illinois.gov/mansiontour.cfm](http://www.Illinois.gov/mansiontour.cfm)). The Association has helped purchase some of the Mansion's extraordinary antiques, such as its three, 235-years-old Waterford crystal chandeliers, Bourland says.

Another noteworthy antique sits in the State Dining Room, next to the 150-year-old mahogany dinner table. This smaller, octagonal game table was painstakingly crafted in 1864 by Wisconsin artist Peter Scott Glass. The piece depicts profiles of four politicians from that time surrounded by intricate designs made from 20,000 bits of wood. Once the table was finished, Glass charged viewers one quarter apiece to raise money to take it to Abraham Lincoln at the White House. He got it there just in time, Lincoln was shot two weeks later.

The Victorian-decorated Lincoln Bedroom on the Mansion's second floor is a sad reminder of Lincoln's assassination. Its ornately carved bed and dresser were given to Lincoln by Springfield friends before he left for his inauguration. They were stored until the Lincolns returned to Springfield. Obviously, the Lincolns never used them.

While Mansion events are primarily held by nonprofit groups, according to Bourland, the public can tour it for free. Tours begin at 9:30 a.m. on Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays. Afternoon tours begin at 2 p.m. on Tuesdays and Thursdays. No reservations are necessary unless you have a group of ten or more. For more information about public tours, contact:

Illinois Executive Mansion  
410 East Jackson  
Springfield, Illinois 62701  
(217) 782-2525



# State Historic Sites Re-opened

On April 23rd, Illinois Governor Pat Quinn re-opened historic sites around the state that were shut last year by former governor Rod Blagojevich. Earlier this year, the Illinois General Assembly approved legislation to re-hire historic site employees who were terminated when the sites closed; the bill also merges the sites' overseer, the Illinois Historic Preservation Agency, with the Illinois Department of Natural Resources beginning this July.

In addition to the reopening of 11 sites, many other historic sites have increased the number of days they will be open, at least during the summer. (A current schedule for Illinois State Historic Sites follows this article.) Dave Blanchette, spokesman for the Illinois Historic Preservation Agency, says between two and a half and three million visitors come to Illinois' historic sites each year, except for last year when some were shuttered.

One of the re-opened sites is Springfield's Dana-Thomas House, which was designed by renowned American architect Frank Lloyd Wright for Springfield socialite Susan Lawrence Dana. "It's very gratifying to everybody be open again," says House Site Manager Dr. Donald Hallmark. "The spirit around here is absolutely wonderful. I've been with the site for 28 years and I've never seen it better than it is right now, in terms of the public response -- everybody telling us they're glad we're open, and our volunteers who were anxious to get back to work."

Dr. Hallmark was the House's sole caretaker while it was closed November 30th, 2008 through April 23rd of this year. He kept a list of individuals and groups who called hoping to tour the site during its closure. Two of those were Frank Lloyd Wright fans from Montana. They were traveling to Illinois in mid-May for a Frank Lloyd Wright House Tour in Oak Park and when Dr. Hallmark notified them of the House's re-opening, they changed their itinerary to visit the Dana-Thomas House as well.

For Dr. Hallmark, who is retiring June 30th, the

re-opening is particularly special. "I wanted to stay with the House until it reopened," he says. "It's interesting, I started my career here 28 years ago when the state first bought the building in 1981. And the first month I was here in the building all by myself. My boss, the first day, came down -- they didn't even have keys or anything made yet, and he locked me in the House and told me to get used to everything that was here. My background was teaching Frank Lloyd Wright, so it was a great day in the House just making a list of everything that was here."

He started working in the House alone and he nearly ended it that way. "It came full circle," Dr. Hallmark says.



*After being closed for five months, the Dana-Thomas House in Springfield re-opened in late April. When Governor Jim Thompson opened it as a state historic site in 1983, he called this Frank Lloyd Wright-designed home "the finest example of the creativity and uniqueness characteristic of the Prairie School of Architecture." Photo courtesy of the Illinois Historic Preservation Agency.*

House staff and volunteers only had nine days' notice that the site was re-opening, which meant they had to kick into high gear. The day before the opening the House's gift shop, called the Sumac Shop, received 20 boxes of goods. Numerous volunteers pitched in and by opening day, the Shop's shelves were stocked and ready to go and the House was clean and ready for tourists.

Here is a current list of Illinois State Historic Sites' Schedules (for exact hours of business, call the particular historic site):

Apple River Fort, Elizabeth: Wednesday through Sunday

Bishop Hill, Bishop Hill: Wednesday through Sunday

Black Hawk, Rock Island: Continue park operations and re-open Hauberg Indian Museum from

Wednesdays through Sundays.

Bryant Cottage, Bement: Wednesday through Sunday through September 6, 2009.

Cahokia Courthouse, Cahokia: Open Tuesdays through Saturdays.

Cahokia Mounds, Collinsville: Open every day through October 31, 2009.

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Carl Sandburg, Galesburg: Open Saturdays and Sundays and for special events.

Dana-Thomas House, Springfield: Open Wednesdays through Sundays.

David Davis Mansion, Bloomington: Open Wednesdays through Sundays.

Douglas Tomb, Chicago: Open Wednesdays through Sundays.

Fort de Chartres, Prairie du Rocher: Open Wednesdays through Sundays.

Fort Kaskaski, Ellis Grove: Open every day.

Galena Historic Sites: the U.S. Grant Home is open Wednesdays through Sundays, the Washburne House is open Fridays through October, the Old Mark House (leased to the JoDaviess County tourism office) is open daily.

Jubilee College, Brimfield: Open Wednesdays through Sundays.

Lewis and Clark, Hartford: Open every day.

Lincoln-Herndon Law Offices, Springfield: Open every day through September 7, 2009. Beginning September 8, it will be open Tuesdays through Saturdays.

Lincoln Log Cabin, Lerna: Open daily through September 7, 2009.

Lincoln's New Salem, Petersburg: Open every day through September 14, 2009.

Lincoln Tomb, Springfield: Open every day through September 7, 2009.

Old State Capitol, Springfield: Open daily through September 7, 2009.

Pierre Menard, Ellis Grove: Open Wednesdays through Sundays.

Pullman, Chicago: Open for walk-in visitation seven days per week from 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. through October 11, 2009. Other dates and times available by appointment.

Vachel Lindsay Home, Springfield: Open Saturdays, with a five day per week schedule to be implemented in the near future.

Vandalia Statehouse, Vandalia: Open daily through September 7, 2009.



## Transitions

On April 19, veteran lobbyist William Perkins, Jr. died. The Illinois House of Representatives passed a resolution on April 23 honoring him. Perkins is a past speaker of the "Illinois Third House," a lobbyists' organization, and received the group's Lifetime Achievement Award in 2004. He died at his LaGrange Park home.

On May 12, Governor Pat Quinn named Chicago Alderman Billy Ocasio as a senior advisor to work on "an array of important social justice issues that impact communities throughout the state." Ocasio has been an alderman for Chicago's near-northwest side for 15 years.

Governor Quinn chose Michael Randle to head the Illinois Department of Corrections, he announced on May 14. Randle is a veteran of corrections administration. He is currently the Assistant Director of the Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Correction and has worked for that department since 1990. He will begin working here in June.

