

‘The Store’: A Moving Saga

by Michael I. Kelly

One of Wilmette's most significant early buildings, which vanished decades ago from the Green Bay Rd. streetscape, was discovered recently on Emerson St. in Evanston, living a quiet life as a residence. It had stood at 607 Green Bay from the 1870s to 1953.

A familiar sight to the first generation of Wilmette residents, the building housed the village's first general store and the family of its proprietor, William Henry Kinney. Strategically located directly across from the 1873 train depot (which stood west of the tracks), this modest two-story frame structure anchored Wilmette's first, fledgling business district.

Early settler Julia Kirk would recall: “Soon after arriving in the village [in 1877], I went to the store, and it was The Store. A small grocery, with the post office on one side. Henry Kinney was the proprietor, and I asked for vegetables and fruit. He said they never kept those things, everybody had a garden and there was no demand for them...”



607 Green Bay Rd., Wilmette, 1900

At a reunion of early Wilmette settlers in 1916, J. Melville Brown remarked, “Many here remember Mr. Kinney, who sold us our groceries, was station agent, postmaster, express agent, village treasurer, and general confidant and friend of the needy!”

Brown recalled that Kinney also presided over a community center for early Wilmettians: “The old hard coal stove in the rear of his store was a meeting place for all and the starting point of many a story or bit of gossip while waiting for Mr. Kinney's cry ‘All up’.”

The store even supplied a home for Wilmette's very first library. A small collection of books purchased by the village literary society was located in the rear of the Kinney store for a time in the early 1880s.

After Kinney's death in 1895, the business was taken over by his clerk, Frank Smith, who ran the grocery until about 1915. A photo in the Historical Museum's collection of the store's interior shows a deep room flanked by long counters, the tall shelves stacked with cans and boxes. Mr. Smith, in bowler hat, helps a

long-skirted lady customer, while his dog watches from atop a nearby stool. In subsequent years, the building housed a succession of businesses, including a harness maker, rug merchant, shingle installer, oil burner dealer, and drapery firm. By 1935 it had become the home of the Versino family's sporting goods shop, which later moved next door to 605 Green Bay, where it continues in business today.

The venerable structure narrowly survived the Palm Sunday tornado of 1920, which devastated much of Wilmette's central business district. Photos show the façade - a tall, squared-off wall typical of 19th-century frame storefronts - peeled away by the storm, leaving the family living quarters upstairs eerily

undisturbed, even to the furniture and the pictures on the walls.



2120 Emerson St., Evanston, 2006

Although the old Kinney place stood its ground against the tornado, it at last gave way years later, in early 1953, to the expansion plans of Wil-Shore Motor Sales, the longtime Ford dealership, which

required the removal of three adjoining buildings on the block. While the early structures at 609 and 617 Green Bay Road were lost to the wrecking ball, the one at 607 caught the eye of Evanston resident John T. White, who moved it to his vacant lot at 2120 Emerson St. and converted it into a rental property. The City of Evanston moving permit dated April 27, 1953 charts the old building's slow route out of Wilmette: south down Green Bay to McCormick, south on McCormick to Church, east on Church to the Sanitary District canal, and north to Emerson St.

In the half-century since, the one-time Wilmette landmark has provided homes for a succession of Evanston families, just as it once did for the families of Henry Kinney, Frank Smith, and other early proprietors. And while the 1870s Kinney building lives on, the Wil-Shore building that forced its removal in 1953 has itself been torn down in the past year, reopening the middle of Green Bay Road's 600 block to yet another cycle of redevelopment.

Michael Kelly is a local historian and Evanston resident. The story of the building's move and location is based on his own recent research.