

Breese Historical Society: Looking to our Past, Present, and Future

Bailey Kampwerth
All Saints Academy, Breese
Teacher: Stephanie Garcia

The City of Breese, located in southern Illinois, was named after Sidney Breese. Breese was born in central New York on July 15, 1800. He served as a United States Senator, was a member of the Illinois General Assembly, became speaker of the House, and later Chief Justice of the Illinois Supreme Court. One of his outstanding achievements in his career as Chief Justice was his support in building the Illinois Central Railroad. Breese, started out as a volunteer in the Black Hawk War in 1832 and worked his way up to Lieutenant Colonel.

The township village, now the City of Breese, provided Chief Justice Breese with the honor of a community named after him. At the time, he was the attorney for the Mississippi and Ohio Railroad. Sidney Breese passed away at his family home in 1878. Today, a statue of Sidney Breese is on display in the State Capitol in Springfield, Illinois.

To help preserve the history of Sidney Breese and other historical information, the Breese Historical Society (BHS) was organized in March 2000. Don Maue, the mayor of Breese, suggested the start of the society. A committee was formed of three men and one woman. Its main goal was to document and collect artifacts about the city of Breese. Barb Von Alst, a resident of Breese and business owner, was the first president of the BHS.

The BHS participates in many civic projects such as the street fests and the annual Christmas parade. It also honors elementary students of All Saints Academy and Breese Elementary who participate and present projects relating to the history of Breese at the Illinois History Fair and those who write for Illinois History magazine. One of the projects that has been recognized by the Historical Society is the historical Avon Theater located in downtown Breese. My brother Brendan Kampwerth and his friend, David Toennies, created a model and provided historical information on the theater for their Illinois History Fair project. Other projects recognized were the Cholera Cross, the Breese Fire District, Excel Bottling Company, the Breese Mining Disaster, Prohibition in Southern Illinois, and the Story of Sidney Breese.

The BHS created *The Breese Sesquicentennial Pictorial History Book, 1856-2006*. The book was created to celebrate Breese's 150-year anniversary. The City Council created a historical committee to gather as much historical data as possible. It began preparing the book in 2003 for publication in May 2006. The residents were invited to provide old photographs, articles, or any historical information about the city. Not only did this information help in writing the book and to educate others, but the BHS hopes to someday create a city museum.

The committee created post cards picturing homes and businesses of Breese. These post cards, sold in packs of four, included decorations around Breese during Christmas, transportation of the past, and events held in the "good old days."

In 2004, the BHS decided to create a historical park and garden. This special site, with its historical images, was to reflect the hard work and dedication of its ancestors connecting our citizens to the past. The lot south of St. Dominic Catholic Church, where

the history park is located today, was bought by Dr. Maurice Coyle and Agnes (Kuhl) Coyle. They purchased the lot because Anna, Agnes' mother, loved watching weddings at St. Dominic. Dr. and Mrs. Coyle donated the property in honor of Agnes' parents, Frank and Anna Kuhl.

In 2005, construction on the park began. The excavation and construction were done by Litteken Construction. The park is surrounded with stone walls, donated by Ralph Von Bokel. The stones used to build St. Dominic's outside walls over 150 years ago, also came from the same Von Bokel Farm. The park includes a black granite pyramid in the middle of the attraction, a gazebo, and a storage area. A recognition wall displays over 180 engraved bricks purchased by many Breese residents. Pavers enhance the walkways. The granite pyramid, on all four sides, includes multiple images of the founder of Breese, Chief Justice Sidney Breese, the three churches of Breese, the Cholera Cross and much more. The Cholera Cross was erected by local farmers praising Jesus during a cholera epidemic in the 1840s. He would praise and honor Jesus with this cross if his family was spared from cholera. Amy Kruse was the architect for these drawings on the pyramid.

Inside the pyramid is a 14-foot tube with an additional sealed tube holding 25 smaller, 14-inch-long time capsules. These capsules donated by different families throughout the community include family's history, pictures, the sesquicentennial book, coins, company logo items, ads from weekly newspapers, 150-year old letters to and from Germany, and a wooden beaded rosary. These smaller capsules were triple sealed, making them waterproof. The tip of the pyramid was sealed at the dedication ceremony on Sunday, April 27, 2008. Barb Richter, a resident of Breese and current president of

the society, organized a volunteer honorary time capsule committee consisting of eighteen youth to open the capsule in 50 years, 2058. My brother, Brendan Kampwerth, and I are honored to be part of the honorary time capsule youth committee. During the ceremony, after putting our commitment papers in a sealed tube, we helped lower them into the ground. We will be in charge of opening the capsule in 50 years.

The BHS Park and Garden is a place where residents and visitors can go to visit, relax, reflect and reminisce. It has been an honor taking part in such an amazing dedication to our past. I will be extremely honored to open the time capsule in 50 years. I look forward to sharing this special historical moment with my future family. [From "Breese Historical Society Enters Legacy Phase of History Park Project," *Breese Journal* Oct. 11, 2007; *Breese Sesquicentennial Pictorial History*, Breese, Illinois: Breese Journal and Company, 2006; "Historical Park Under Construction in Breese," *Breese Journal* June 28, 2007; "New Park Preserves History of Breese," *Breese Journal*, Apr. 24, 2008; Kelly Jo Ross, "History Park Dedicated Sunday in Breese," *Breese Journal* May 1, 2008; Joe and Barb Richter, Student Historian's interview Feb. 9, 2009; and James B. Schlueter, *Breese Quasquicentennial 1856-1981*.]