

New marker dedications this fall

It has been a busy season for the Illinois State Historical Society markers program. The pandemic didn't slow down the applications this spring; we had dedications in Gillespie (P.M.W.A. Founding), Sandwich (Stone Mill), Edwardsville (Lincoln School and the Weir House), Murphysboro (*General Lyon* Disaster), as well as a new initiative to erect markers recognizing African American narratives in Illinois history, sponsored by the William G. Pomeroy Foundation of New York.

The first ISHS marker to utilize the grant Pomeroy Foundation grant is the "Dr. James Henry Lewis and the Lewis Sanitorium" historical marker in Harrisburg. The marker stands in front of a two-story brick building at 517 East Walnut Street, which was until recently vacant, showing no signs of its former life as the Lewis Sanitorium, which operated from the late 1920s until the 1960s as the only hospital serving black patients in a 50 mile radius of the county seat (Harrisburg). Dr. Lewis was one of two African American physicians between Harrisburg and Carbondale at the time, when segregation was the



Dr. James Henry Lewis

unspoken but all-too audible language of America.

Dr. Lewis and the Lewis Sanitorium are the subject of the latest ISHS historical marker, thanks to the Saline County Historical Society and the county tourism board, which unveiled the marker on October 24. The old hospital is now being repurposed as a community center, thanks

to a not-for-profit organization called The Fortress Community (Hope Restored), which is well along in its efforts to reopen the building as a community center.

Dr. Lewis, a World War I veteran and the son of former slaves from North Carolina, earned a scholarship to Wheaton Preparator School in Wheaton, Illinois, and went on to earn a degree at Wheaton College and a medical degree at McHarry College in Memphis, Tennessee, before settling in Harrisburg. According to a letter Dr. Lewis wrote to his Wheaton alma mater, he never forgot his benefactors:

"Back in January, 1908, a ragged, half-starved Negro boy, 4th grader, came from a one-room, two-months-a-year country school in North Carolina to enter the Academy department at Wheaton College [Preparatory School]. By hard study and the patient tutelage of such teachers as Professors H.A. Fischer, D. A. Straw, Miss Elsie S. Dow, Miss Harriet G. Blaine, Dr. G.W. Smith and others, this boy went on to finish Academy (1911) and College (1914)!

Dr. Charles A. Blanchard, then president, remitted my tuition the first semester, and faculty voted me the Schofield Scholarship, monetarily \$260. Our estimate is that interest plus principal amounts to \$1350. I enclose a check for \$500, balance to be paid \$200 a year. In event of death provision is being made to complete the pledge. This small sum invested may return safely \$50 per year to some needy worth student. It gave me an opportunity to do forty years of intensive work in the teaching and medical professions, for Christ and His Kingdom, Heaven bless your work."

Dr. Lewis was working in St. Louis as a successful physician in the early 1920s when he heard there was a need for a Black doctor in Harrisburg. According to his daughter, Jeanne Mays of Swansea, Illinois, Dr. Lewis moved to Harrisburg and built the Lewis Sanitorium, which doubled as his private residence. Here he saw patients for nearly 40 years.

According to Mays, Saline County



Family, friends, and State and Saline County officials at the dedication of the Dr. James Henry Lewis and the Lewis Sanitorium" historical marker dedication in Harrisburg.
Photo by William Furry.



Michael Jones, director of the General John A. Logan Museum, and Saline County Historical Society director Mark Motsinger, unveil the “S.S. General Lyon Disaster” marker in Murphysboro.

Photo courtesy Mark Motsinger.

residents quietly called Dr. Lewis the “Black Jesus,” because he was known far and wide as a physical and spiritual healer. Now 84, Mays is the keeper of her family’s history and shared many stories about her father.

Mays’s father delivered her in 1937, the year of the great flood in southern Illinois. “My father was one of the people who helped people injured and stranded by the flood,” which inundated downtown Harrisburg, and many other communities in the floodplains of the Ohio and Saline rivers.

“My father was always busy, day or night, visiting patients around the

county,” She said. “There weren’t many cars back then, so he rode around in a horse and buggy for the early years.” Later on, she said, during WWII, an auto dealer assembled a car for her father out of spare parts. Mays remembers her father’s encounters with the KKK, which had members throughout Saline County. “Black people didn’t go to the city hospital because they didn’t feel welcome there,” Mays said. “But come Saturday morning the front steps and sidewalks of our house would be lined up with people waiting to see my father.”

Another marker dedicated in southern Illinois was the “The British Invasion Begins,” which commemorates two weeks in the fall of 1963, when George Harrison, a member of the British rock group, the Beatles, came to Benton, Illinois, for a vacation, and later played at a local VFW Hall in Eldorado. It was several months before the Beatles had their first #1 hit in the U.S., and before their appearance on “The Ed Sullivan Show” in February 1964.

The Saline County Tourism Board and the county historical society erected a large ISHS marker in front of the still operating VFW Hall in Eldorado, where Harrison made his debut in America. Not only is the original stage Harrison played on still standing, but the stage carpet hasn’t been replaced

either. Approximately 1,500 people came out for a concert on September 17 performed by Beatles tribute band “The Liverpool Legends,” and for the marker unveiling the following day.

ISHS Marker dedications still to come this fall include:

- Blanchard Hall, Stop on the Underground Railroad, Wheaton
- John L. Lewis and the U.M.W.A., Panama
- The Englemann Farm, Latin Farmers, Belleville



“The British Invasion Begins” historical marker at the VFW Hall #3479 in Eldorado.

Photo courtesy Mark Motsinger.



Dedication of the “Union Miner Cemetery” historical marker in Mt. Olive. *Photo by William Furry.*



Mark Motsinger (right) and Warren Batts, who played in the band The Four Vests and jammed with George Harrison at the Eldorado VFW in 1963. He later toured in Europe with Bill Haley and the Comets.

Photo courtesy Mark Motsinger.