

**Historic Context and Preservation of Alexander Brothers'
Manufactory (contemporarily known as Mill Race Inn)
4 East State Street, Geneva, IL**

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HIST 521: Seminar in Public History

May 16, 2021

In Geneva, IL, about 100 yards east of the Fox River, a small, nondescript, boarded-up limestone structure lingers behind a chain-link fence. Humble in appearance, the building's history stretches back to the early beginnings of this prairie town and its first white settlers. Very little such utilitarian vernacular architecture dating from the first ten years of a settlement remain in Illinois. Even fewer were occupied by the diverse businesses representative of how commerce evolved in a community. Originally built by Julius and Edward Alexander and Lyman German, the Alexander brothers' manufactory - temporarily known as Mill Race Inn - exemplified the practical architecture of an emerging nineteenth century settlement and the changes in commerce ordinary residents experienced from its erection around 1846 to the height of the depression in 1933.

Measuring approximately 30 feet by 48 feet, the Alexander brothers' manufactory was constructed on the east bank of the Fox River next to the State Street bridge leading to the growing village of Geneva on the west bank.¹ A mill race, the channel from the river that was diverted to power the mills built on the opposite (north) side of State Street, returned to the Fox River after passing the Alexander brothers' manufactory.² German and the Alexander brothers used limestone sourced from a nearby quarry for the walls and wood for the gable roof. Below the wood-planked floor they dug out a small cellar. The Alexanders were blacksmiths by trade so local historians have presumed this building was their blacksmith shop. However, records reviewed by the Geneva Historic Preservation Commission indicate the Alexander brothers'

¹ Kane County Recorder, *Kane County Document Books* (Geneva, IL: Kane County Recorder, 1837-1975): 8: 471-472, <https://irs.kanecountyrecorder.net/Search/DocumentBooks>.

² D.W. Ensign & Co., *Atlas of Kane County, Illinois: Drawn and compiled from personal observations, actual surveys and County Records*, 300:1 (Chicago: D.W. Ensign & Co., 1892), 49, accessed May 8, 2021, <https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/100319172>.

blacksmith shop was wood-framed, not limestone. With this information, and the proximity to the mill race, the Commission concluded the building was intended to be used for manufacturing.³

Once discovered by white settlers in the early 1830s, the stretch of the Fox River from present-day Dundee to Aurora became a magnet for new settlers. Flowing north to south, the Fox River was a wide "channel of quite uniform depth, with a quick, steady flow..."⁴ The river was ideal for providing consistent water power to operate a mill and by 1840 there was a newly established village about every five miles along this tract. Geneva, being at about the mid-point of this section of the river, was established on the west bank of the Fox River at the crossroads of two trails of the native Pottawatami tribe.⁵ The valley cut by the river was also ideal farmland. Wheat could be grown and brought only a short distance to a flour mill at the river. Sawmills provided wood to build homes. Paper mills churned out paper for newspapers and letters.⁶ The farmland and mills created a demand for other products and services such as blacksmithing and wagon repair.

Common stone buildings, such as the Alexander brothers' manufactory, were built all over the area and easily altered to manufacture or sell almost anything people needed. Once

³ Micheal A. Lambert, Evolution and Preliminary Historic Significance Evaluation of the Former Mill Race Inn Property, Geneva Historic Preservation Commission, January 15, 2014, rev. July 27, 2016 and August 12, 2016, 2, accessed May 2, 2021, <https://www.geneva.il.us/DocumentCenter/View/2647/MRI-Historical-Development---UPDATED---081216?bidId=>

⁴ Newton Bateman, LL.D, Paul Selby, A.M., and Gen. John S. Wilcox, eds., *Encyclopedia of Illinois and History of Kane County* (Chicago: Munsell Publishing Co.: 1904), 621, <https://archive.org/details/historicalencycl00unse/page/n13/mode/2up>.

⁵ Adam D. Gibbons, *The Founders and Early History of Geneva, Kane County, Illinois Volume I: Beginnings to 1837*, (Bradenton, FL: BookLocker.com: 2014), 24.

⁶ Rodolphus Waite Joslyn and Frank Wilber Joslyn, *History of Kane County, Ill* (Chicago: Pioneer Publishing Co.: 1908), 124-129.

ubiquitous in the nineteenth century, these common structures are nearly extinct in the twenty-first. This rarity makes the architecture of the Alexander brothers' manufactory significant. Everyday citizens passed by it or visited it, being so woven into the fabric of community as to be almost invisible. Yet, these everyday activities tell a lot about the way people lived. Without preservation of what was once common, "a glimpse of the buildings that the first pioneers erected when establishing a new community" will be lost.⁷ While not glamorous, the Alexander brothers' manufactory is rich in its commonness.

Located in a highly trafficked area and easily adaptable, the limestone building remained important to commerce as the village grew into a city. Between 1846 and 1933, the Alexander brothers' manufactory was a paper mill, carriage and wagon shop, cooperage factory, laundry business, painting shop, machinist shop, auto sales and repair store and plumbing and heating business until it was converted to the Mill Race Inn restaurant in 1933.⁸ The building went through extensive modifications during that period as well. A wood-framed second floor was added and a doorway widened for the wagon shop, steam-powered equipment was added for the cooperage, and a window enlarged and wall removed when the building was remodeled into the restaurant.⁹ Throughout its history, the building was like a chameleon, changing and evolving alongside the community.

Preserving the Alexander brothers' manufactory, however, presents a number of challenges. According to the development company that currently owns the property, the

⁷ Lambert, Former Mill Race Inn Property, 23.

⁸ Julia M. Ehresmann, ed., *Geneva Illinois: A History of Its Time and Places*, Sesquicentennial Commemorative Edition (Geneva, IL: Geneva Public Library District, 1985): 33, 38, 56. See also: Lambert, Former Mill Race Inn Property, 8-12.

⁹ Lambert, Former Mill Race Inn Property, 4-13.

building is dilapidated from nearly a decade of vacancy, is too heavy and fragile to move and could not sustain the weight from new construction to repurpose it.¹⁰ Further complicating preservation is the fact that the building is well below the road grade of the bridge now adjacent to it. While only ten yards or so from the roadway, the building is almost completely hidden.

Despite the grim judgment of the owners, the Geneva community, which already has two districts and four buildings on the National Registry of Historic Places, is firmly in favor of preserving this early-settlement manufactory. In 2018, Geneva alderman voted overwhelmingly to designate it a local historic landmark giving the community more time to work with the developers to preserve and repurpose the building.¹¹ Furthering the case for preservation is a 2016 review of the property conducted by the Geneva Historic Preservation Commission. Contrary to the owners' assessment, the Commission found "no readily-discernible signs of imminent structural failure." Moreover, the Commission determined that 82% of the exterior and interior walls are original to the 1846 construction even though the building has endured numerous modifications.¹²

Everyday lives of the residents of this river town are embodied in the unassuming Alexander brothers' manufactory and their stories deserve to be told. This mundane but now rare building not only reveals the history of the formation of the city but also its evolution up to the depression. Additionally, preservation of historic buildings is part of the culture of this community represented by recently halting the wrecking ball aimed at it from the current owner.

¹⁰ Linda Girardi, "Geneva declares Old Mill Race Inn building a landmark," *Aurora Beacon News*, May 9, 2018, <https://www.chicagotribune.com/suburbs/aurora-beacon-news/ct-abn-mill-race-inn-st-0510-story.html>.

¹¹ Girardi, "Old Mill Race Inn."

¹² Lambert, Former Mill Race Inn Property, 23.

Because the building was a significant part of an early settlement structure, its vernacular architecture is nearly extinct, and its role in the evolution of commerce for Geneva's residents, the Alexander brothers' manufactory is a consequential building that should be preserved.

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Special thanks to the Geneva Public Library and David Scholes of the Kane County Recorder's Office for assistance with assessment documents, plat maps, and local history resources.