

NEW ALBANY 100 YEARS AGO

On December 16, 1856, exactly 100 years ago today, the steamer *Baltic*, newly-built in New Albany, sailed down the river to enter service in the Southern trade. Shipbuilding was the city's lifeblood a century ago, and the waterfront and Main Street were the heart of business activities in the community.

Other enterprises flourished along the riverfront, too. The Montezuma and Shades taverns, or coffee houses, as they were called, were notorious for gambling, drinking and fighting and no respectable New Albany citizen ventured near.

That respectable citizen might be found reading his newspaper in his parlor by candle light or whale oil lamp, with a cheery fire in the fireplace. Central heat was unheard of and there was no gas lighting in buildings yet, though the whole city was proud of the new gas lights along the streets that dispelled the blackness.

When the citizen of 1856 wanted water, he took a bucket to the public pump on the street, unless he were lucky enough to have his own. Shopping for groceries meant a trip to the two market houses on Market Street between Pearl and W. First and that trip probably was made on foot since there was no public transportation in the city, unless the horse bus that the DePauw House, New Albany's leading hotel, operated between the hotel and the new railroad depot at Pearl and Oak, could be considered public transit. While our citizen of 1856 was downtown he no doubt stopped at the post office to get his mail, since there was no house-to-house delivery.

For an evening's entertainment he might take his family to Woodward Hall at Main and W. First to hear the Swiss bellringers or perhaps the illustrated lecture on the recently-ended Crimean War. And he no doubt witnessed the city's first balloon ascension made in 1856 at Spring and East Fourth. He might even have been showered with sand as the balloonist opened a bag of sand ballast so he would rise high enough to avoid striking the tower on Centenary Methodist Church.

New furnishings for the home meant a trip to West Main Street where the cabinet maker and dry-goods merchants were concentrated. Ready-made furniture was almost unknown, but a cabinet-maker was ready to turn out any piece at short notice.

Adventurous young men were probably lured by the U.S. Army Cavalry recruiting stand set up in Scribner Park to sign up volunteers for the Indian fighting in the West.

As our citizen of 1856 read in his newspaper of the bloody struggle in Kansas between free-soilers and the pro-slavery faction, he no doubt felt troubled at the political storm clouds brewing. The slavery issue was becoming more explosive every day, and he had probably seen the Kentucky constables who were coming through New Albany more and more frequently in search of runaway slaves. New Albany was divided on the issue and the proposal of some members of the Young Men's Christian Society to bring Wendell Phillips, the fiery New England abolitionist, to New Albany to deliver a lecture had to be abandoned because of the controversy it created.

Not all New Albany citizens read *The Ledger* or *The Tribune* – and for a very good reason. They found it easier to read a paper printed in their native German. The Germans, and Irish, lumped together in 1856 under the term “foreigners”, had swelled the city's population considerably. Many of their

customs seemed strange then, but are now part of our everyday life. The festivity which we associate with Christmas was borrowed from the German immigrants. Only one Christmas ad appeared in the New Albany papers 100 years ago. Peter Frentz, a German, advertised "Christmas Notions" for sale.

Though much has changed in New Albany since a century ago, much still remains the same. East Main Street, then the city's choicest residential area, still remains with its fine homes as a heritage from the past. But more than buildings has been bequeathed as the New Albany heritage. The community pride that marked the city in 1856 still runs deep in the city today – a pride based on the accomplishments of the past and the challenge of the next 100 years.

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