

Vinegar Hill History

by Bill Castor

I remember, what first piqued my interest in Springfield history was not visiting the many historic sites in the area nor reading about Abraham Lincoln or Vachel Lindsay, though I've since acquired an appreciation of all of these. Rather, it was hearing some of the colorful, sometimes irreverent, unofficial names given the various neighborhoods in town and speculating about their origins. Among them are: Hollywood, Little Italy, the Cabbage Patch, Goosetown, Rabbit Row, Dogpatch, Gasoline Alley, Mother's Tub, Chicken Row, Donnigan's Flats, Skid Row, the Levy and, of course, our very own, "Vinegar Hill". Recently I spent time at the Sangamon Valley Collection, located at Lincoln Library (the city public library, not the presidential library). Following are some of the things I found of interest regarding the Vinegar Hill Area.

Some accounts credit a "vinegar works" on the corner of Spring and Cook Streets, with the origin of the Vinegar Hill name. Other Springfield historians refute this, however, citing little or no evidence of its existence. Since many (but certainly not all) early residents of the area were Irish immigrants, what's now more widely believed to be the namesake for the area is another Vinegar Hill, located outside Enniscorthy Ireland. It was the location of a bloody battle on June 21, 1798, where an Irish Rebellion against the British Crown was put down. It's not clear why this particular location was commemorated, since the Irish rebels were roundly defeated there. Perhaps as a tribute to those who fought and died there for the cause of Irish independence.

The October 1, 1951 issue of the Citizen's Tribune, a weekly newspaper in Springfield, detailed an interview with an "old-timer" from the Vinegar Hill area who lived here dating back to around the turn of the 20th Century. He described the Vinegar Hill District as an area roughly from Scarritt Street on the south to Capitol Street on the north, pretty much the heart of our current Vinegar Hill Neighborhood Association territory. But it's also apparent what was commonly understood to be Vinegar Hill seems to have drifted over time, as an earlier article referred to Vinegar Hill as a site considered for construction of Lincoln's Tomb, where the current State Capitol Building now stands.

Many colorful stories were written about early Vinegar Hill Residents. One relates an account of the Royal Tigers baseball team. A team named after a tailor shop that promised, but never delivered, uniforms. They kept the name in spite of this, and also in spite of the apparent irony that most of the players' Irish ancestors despised anything involving royalty. Other stories range from those of famous residents of "The Hill", including Springfield police chief, John Underwood, to the infamous Vinegar Hill Cadets, reputed to be one of the toughest gangs in town.

While the Vinegar Hill Neighborhood Association area is no longer a predominantly Irish residential area, we chose to pay tribute to those early Springfield Irish immigrants by incorporating the green and gold colors and the Gaelic knots and font style into the design of our VHNA logo. Oh, and I'll certainly do my part by lofting a pint or two on St. Patty's day! Here's mud in yer eye, mate.