

Why Augustana College Moved to Rock Island

Last month we talked about how the Norwegians left the College in 1869 to form their own college which eventually ended up locating in Sioux Falls, South Dakota and now called Augustana University. At that time Augustana College was located in Paxton, IL, where it had moved from Chicago in 1863. Conrad Bergendoff in his book, "Augustana...A Profession of Faith, A History of Augustana College, 1860-1935" explained how that move came to be.

In 1868 while Professor Sidney Harkey was in Moline, he had been told that Geneseo was willing to raise \$40,000 through a bond issue if Augustana would move to Geneseo from Paxton. In 1869 the Board of Directors expressed interest in such a move if ten acres of land were added. At the synod meeting in June, the Board reported that a third building had been completed in Paxton, but also recommended the acceptance of the Geneseo proposal. The synod changed its charter to state that the school could be located "at any suitable place within the State of Illinois." There was no great support to stay in Paxton, which had shown little interest in the college and had not fulfilled its initial promises. By 1870 the Synod had permitted the Norwegians to form their own synod and school. Augustana College legally would be called Augustana College and Theological Seminary. There would be preparatory, collegiate and theological departments.

By 1871 Geneseo officials refused to keep the proposed bond issue. The synod empowered the Board to accept offers from Knox, Henry, Rock Island, Bureau or Cook counties. Professor Henry Reck, who we talked about last year, discovered a sixteen-acre plot half way between Rock Island and Moline which could be purchased from Henry Hull for \$10,000.

So why Rock Island? Supporters claimed it was a rival to Chicago for the metropolis of the West. It was praised for its beauty and fertility by the French and Indian voyagers and had been the capital of the Sauk nation. In 1870 over 1,000 steamers had docked in Rock Island and by 1881 there were 2,644. The first railroad bridge across the Mississippi was built in Rock Island in 1856---thus rail traffic from the eastern states to the west went through Rock Island. The Arsenal and the John Deere factory in Moline provided jobs. Rock Island was the location of the vast lumber industry of Denkmann and Weyerhaeuser. The Hull property was located on the trolley line between Rock Island and Moline. And in the decade 1870-1880, over 3,500 Scandinavians had arrived. What a perfect place! Certainly rivaling Chicago!

By 1873 a corner-stone was laid but a panic and depression that year resulted in no funds to finish the basement. The college continued to teach classes in Paxton until 1875. The initial idea of two buildings for instruction and two for faculty housing in Rock Island proved too expensive and instead one large building was opened to students on Sept. 22, 1875. This building would house faculty and students, dining facilities, lecture rooms, library and a chapel. Despite the difficulty of raising funds, this first building and the land would cost \$35,000. And as they say, the rest is history. Now there are 33 buildings on 115 acres.

Thanks to the courageous and persevering members of the faculty, Board and friends we are able to say, Augustana College, Rock Island.