

HISTORY OF THE MAGILL HOUSE

To entice the Illinois Central to consider Clinton a viable player in the railroad's future expansion, the community realized it needed to reinvest in itself to market Clinton as a progressive town. As early as October of 1871, one of the Clinton papers was naming "a good hotel" as one of the "great needs of Clinton." The selling of the Gilman, Clinton, and Springfield line to the Illinois Central in December of 1871 and the opening of the Havana, Lincoln, and Clinton line in January of 1872 prompted a group of prominent DeWitt County citizens, C. H. Moore, Thomas Snell, Henry Magill, E.H. Palmer, C.P. Ford, James DeLand, and Lawrence Weldon, to unify and organize the necessary clout to convince the Illinois Central that Clinton was its central Illinois location for the future.

When the idea of constructing a large, elegant brick hotel was presented to the citizens of the city, many offered their support, but only the Magill brothers offered to build this grand incentive for the railroads and their passengers.

The Magill brothers had located in Clinton in 1854. Hugh Magill was an Irish immigrant who had brought his family to Clinton by way of Vermont, New York State, and Indiana. Hugh Magill had taken a contract grading and tiling the roadbed of the Michigan Central Railroad from Michigan City, Indiana, to Chicago. His four sons, William, Samuel, Henry, and Robert, joined him in this venture. When the work had been successfully executed, he and his son William went to Bloomington, Illinois, in February 1853 and took a contract for the building of the Chicago and Alton railroad from Bloomington to Lexington under the firm name of Emery-Magill Company, and later they built sixteen miles of the Illinois Central Railroad from Bloomington to Hudson. The four sons became partners in their father's business and extended their field of operations, opening a large general store in Bloomington, managed by Sam and Henry, while William and Robert assisted Hugh in the executing the railroad contracts.

In 1854, the entire family moved to Clinton, bringing with them a stock of merchandise from the Bloomington store. In 1855, they sold the Bloomington store and bought out the firm of Phares and Shore in Clinton. This was just one of many successful business ventures made by the Magill Company, as the cooperative businesses of the four Magill brothers were now known.

For some time the brothers owned little land and instead invested their capital in enterprises that would bring quicker returns. However, seeing the future prospects in DeWitt County, they bought land when opportunity offered, and, retaining possession of these parcels, they saw many double in value. They eventually owned several thousand acres of the finest land in the county. In 1870 the Magill Company graded the roadbed and furnished and placed the ties and irons for the Gilman, Clinton, and Springfield Railroad. William and Robert managed the farms and the railroad contracts. Samuel managed their general store on the east side of the square and built it into the premiere "dry goods" establishment in Clinton. They invested with John Warner and others to create Clinton's first bank in 1867, operating under the name of John Warner and Company. Henry, who managed the banking interests and family finances, was also active in raising the money toward securing the location of the railroad machine shops in Clinton. The Magills had become one of the most influential, successful, and entrepreneurial families in DeWitt County.

However, due to the high cost and highly speculative nature of the hotel project, the Magills offered to build the hotel needed to lure the railroad business only if the citizens of Clinton would provide \$10,000 toward its construction. The building carried an estimated price tag of \$37,000. The Magills had originally planned three two-story brick businesses on the lot but could be persuaded to expand the project to include three businesses on the ground floor with a three-story hotel above if the community contributed a third of the capital.

From the *Clinton Public*, April 4, 1872:

Only one chance remains by which the new hotel will be built on the Magill block. These gentlemen feel that a necessity exists for a hotel, and that it would be both an ornament and of great benefit to Clinton; but at the same time they do not feel like assuming the whole burden. Their proposition is something like this: They will furnish two-thirds of the money required to build it, if some of our capitalists will become partners in the enterprise to the amount of one-third. We have no doubt that a joint stock company could be easily formed to invest one-third of the cost, but the Magills do not think such a plan would be feasible. In a multiplicity of ownership in an enterprise of this kind, there is always sure to be some who would not work pleasantly with the other members of the company, therefore the Magills look with more favor on the partnership plan, where three or four would control the whole. There are capitalists in Clinton who could take part in this enterprise and not feel the amount required. Will they do it? The hotel would be a permanent monument to the enterprise of its builders, and at the same time supply a long-felt need in this city. If this opportunity should fall, another may not again offer what would be in every respect so desirable. The hotel would be an ornament to the square and to the whole city. Let us hope that the Magills will find some men of like enterprise with themselves who will take hold of this matter and put it through to completion.

The community had just over one month to raise the \$10,000 or lose the hotel. Utilizing the local paper and heavy door-to-door campaigning, by May 4, \$9,250.00 had been raised, and the local paper made a final desperate plea to the public.

From the *Clinton Public*, May 2, 1872:

Shall all the patient labor that has been expended thus far go for nought for that trivial amount? Will the progressive men of Clinton suffer the hotel to be lost when \$750.00 will secure it? Some who have done nothing claim that the Magills ought to build it whether or not the balance is raised. We think not. The Magills liberally offered to invest \$27,000, and the hotel committee guaranteed to raise \$10,000. Till the people have fulfilled their part of the contract they have no right to expect the Magills to go on with the building.... The shares are fifty dollars each, and it will only require fifteen men to take one share each to complete the ten thousand dollar subscription. Shall it not be closed up this week? ... you will have the satisfaction of knowing you have helped to build up the town.

One week later, on May 9, the *Public* reported, “with pleasure we announce the new hotel as a fact and that the work of its construction has already commenced.”

The hotel opened the following year with a grand celebration and lavish party. A Chicago newspaper noted the opening of the new hotel in Clinton. Praised as the “finest, largest, and most well-arranged hotel in downstate Illinois,” the newspapers reported that the “three-story brick structure of forty-five rooms with a full basement covered half a city block.” The elegant hand-carved stairway, the spacious lobby, dining room, billiard room, and the broad and commodious corridors were impressive amenities not found in many communities outside of larger metropolitan areas such as Chicago or St. Louis, and especially not in a small community in Central Illinois.

A “hack line” with barns located one block to the east of the Magill House operated a bus, two hacks, and a baggage wagon, which were on hand to meet all trains both day and night.

So impressed by the Magill House were the Illinois Central’s officers that the company relocated in Clinton by the late 1870’s. All of the Illinois Central’s Springfield division repair and maintenance work was being done at this place and would continue for the next seventy years. From this time until the mid 1950’s, Clinton was, in every sense of the word, known as a prosperous “railroad town,” and the main contributing factor that started it all, the Magill House, was the temporary home for railroad executives, workers, and their guests throughout all those years, as well as many railroad travelers and visitors to the community.

Inspired by the construction of the hotel, the town square underwent a boom of construction, with each foot of lot opening upon the square increasing in value many times. In the year were built G.W. Savage’s brick block and the DeWitt County National Bank on the southwest side of the square, the Masonic block on the west side, Wolf and McHenry’s brick block on the northwest side, as well as the Union Block. Frame structures were replaced by larger, more permanent brick structures, and as the number of large, permanent buildings on the square increased, so did Clinton’s population.

It was not just the city’s business district that benefited from the revamping of the public square. People began to take more pride in their homes, as well. As reported in 1882, “Handsome new dwelling houses have been built on every street, and general improvement in polishing old residences have followed. Pride in ownership was evident throughout the city,” wrote the author, and his article credited most of this decade of community improvement to the very building that started it all: the Magill House.

Following the death of Robert Magill in 1874, the Magills split off a fourth of their holdings to provide for his widow and small children. The remaining three continued to build the Magill business empire until 1871, when Henry became an invalid and later died in February of 1873. Also in 1873, William took ill and lingered until his death in September. Samuel, after sitting at William’s bedside for months and trying to run the extensive business holdings alone, passed away less than two months later. The hotel was sold in 1884 in a Master of Chancery (estate) sale to Henry Rennick, who already owned several buildings on the square. After the death of Rennick’s wife in 1887, he sold the business to his brother-in-law William H. Taylor in 1888.

By using Sanborn maps of the town created for insurance companies, we know that Taylor added to the hotel in 1888, 1890, or 1891. The original hotel was a three-story building with a two-story wing which housed banquet rooms on the first floor and guest rooms on the second floor. The expansion extended the lower two-story existing wing to the center of the block and built a third story over the whole west structure. This enlarged the banquet facilities and added thirteen to fourteen more guest rooms, bringing the hotel rooms for rent to approximately sixty-five.

Upon the death of William Taylor in 1905, ownership descended to his son Edward, an engineer on the Illinois Central Railroad. During the 1920's, the name "Magill House" was changed to the "Hotel Magill." The hotel continued under the ownership of Edward Taylor until his death in 1943. At that time, the property was transferred to his son Henry.

Henry Taylor took over the active management of the hotel, and in 1950 the official title was again changed. This time the new name incorporated the Taylor name, and the Hotel Magill officially became the Taylor-Magill Hotel. Henry and his wife Eileen ran the business until selling it in the late 1980's.

Unfortunately, according to available records, the major expansion about 1890 was the last time the hotel was extensively remodeled. Updatings were done throughout its 134-year life, but never with the professionalism of its first twenty years. The hotel began to become dated within the first forty years of its life.

This excerpt is taken from the *DeWitt County History* written in 1910:

When built in 1873, the Magill House was considered among the largest and best hostelries in central Illinois. Today it is very much out of the reckoning. Its outside walls give it the appearance of having been built in the eighteenth century, and its interior is lacking in most of the essentials demanded by travelers of the twentieth century. However, the Magill stands for Clinton's "first class" hotel.

Although three other much smaller hotels and several boarding houses came and went over the years, being the biggest and best hotel in Clinton kept the Magill House the dominant lodging establishment in town for the first half of the twentieth century. Modern facelifts given in the 1950's and 1960's, partially to update and partially to increase energy efficiency, robbed the building of much of its original interior character. With the ever-growing use of air travel, the sophistication of the highway and interstate system, the railroad's popularity began to decrease, and with its decrease, so did the number of guests choosing the Taylor-Magill. The Taylor-Magill still had many rooms that were only equipped with a sink for plumbing amenities, and guests in these rooms were required to share a bath with other guests. These rooms were acceptable to railroad workers stopping over for the evening in the first half of the twentieth century, but this was not keeping in style with other more modern hotel chains being built around the community during the fifties, sixties, and seventies. By the seventies, the hotel, although remaining a hotel in name, was becoming more a long-term stay facility. Guests were renting rooms for weeks and even months at a time.

The Taylor family concentrated on quality food service and became well known throughout the area for their excellent meals and service. According to Eileen Taylor, in the 1960's, the hotel was the first restaurant in the central Illinois area to offer a buffet on Sundays, and often the lines would be "out the door and down the block" on buffet days.

When the Taylor family sold the hotel in 1978, subsequent owners quickly let the establishment's quality drop dramatically in cleanliness, room comfort, and food service. Soon after, local service clubs, such as Rotary and Kiwanis, began to leave the restaurant, and business began to drop off. The building fell into disrepair, and, sadly, the Taylor-Magill Hotel, after three different names and several different owners, closed quietly. After over 120 years in business, it left a lasting legacy to a community that owed an important part of its very existence to the building.