

# Flossmoor History After 1924



# **Author's Note**

This work was first presented in 2021 as part of a temporary display in the library building. It has been reformatted and lightly updated for presentation on the library's website for the village's centennial celebration in 2024.

**Although this document covers the post-1924 era, it sometimes refers to events and people from before then. It is highly recommended that you read our other history document (Flossmoor History Before 1924) to get the basic background of Flossmoor's history before reading this one.**

Although I have endeavored to provide accurate factual information, there is always a chance of slight error in a document like this. If the reader should note any errors or omissions, please submit them to [flossref@flossmoorlibrary.org](mailto:flossref@flossmoorlibrary.org) and we may update this document at a future date.

Finally, this work would be impossible without the work of local historians who have written about Flossmoor over the years. Their works are listed on the final page of this document. I am eternally grateful for their efforts.

*David Martin  
Head of Adult Services  
Flossmoor Public Library  
February 2024*

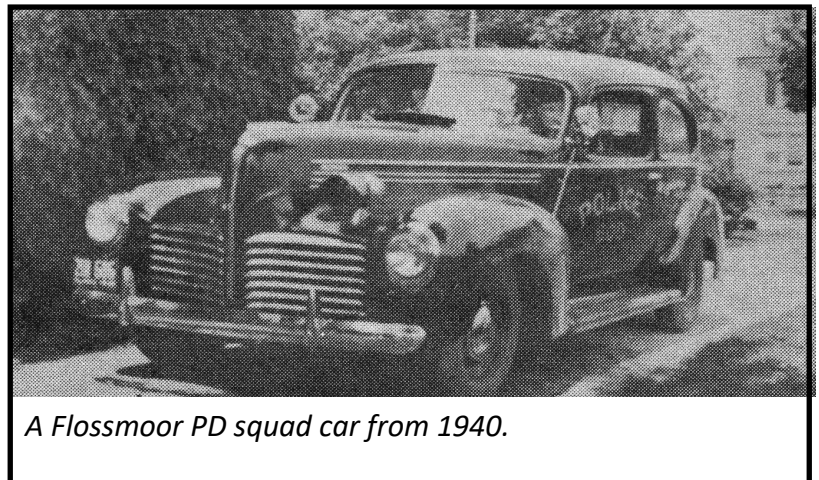
## PART ONE: INCORPORATION

On February 29, 1924, a special “Leap Year’s Day Dinner Party” was held at the Leavitt Avenue School as a fundraiser for the school’s PTA. After the dinner, some men gathered in the school’s basement to smoke and discuss the idea of incorporating as a village.

Between that smoke-filled basement meeting and election day (June 10, 1924), a committee of seven residents was formed and two mass meetings were held to discuss the pros and cons of incorporation. At this time, Flossmoor had a population of 265. Village boundaries had to be identified and recorded; the committee created a map describing a village encompassing 1.99 square miles. On Election Day, 128 voters turned out; the incorporation question passed by a vote of 68—60, indicating the voters were fairly divided on the issue.

After the vote passed, the village elected six trustees to create the first Village Board. D.J. Brumley, an engineer for the Illinois Central Railroad, was selected to be the first Village President (Flossmoor did not elect “mayors” until 1961). The first board was tasked with writing a complete set of ordinances outlining how the village would be governed and how revenues would be raised to provide municipal services. Two interesting early ordinances that influenced Flossmoor’s development were a prohibition on industry—which preserved an pastoral, residential nature for the village—and a prohibition on the sale of alcohol, which stayed on the books until 1972, long after national prohibition had ended.

One of the first priorities for the young village was providing police protection. Unfortunately, there was no budget set aside for this purpose and the police department was “volunteer only” until a professional was hired in 1928, with more to come in the following years. Also in 1928, a volunteer fire department was formed. Before then, Flossmoor residents depended on the Homewood Fire Department for protection. The village board spent \$12,500 on firefighting equipment that was stored at the local gas station—now Flossmoor Family Auto Repair— as there was no firehouse yet.



*A Flossmoor PD squad car from 1940.*

## **PART TWO: THE COMMERCIAL DISTRICT**

At the time of the 1924 incorporation, Flossmoor had no “downtown” to speak of and little commercial activity other than a real estate office to sell empty lots. The IC Railroad had subdivided the land along the west side of Sterling Avenue into lots two decades before, but the low population of the area at the time hampered commercial development. After incorporation, a flurry of development occurred, which defined Flossmoor’s charm and character well into the 21st Century.

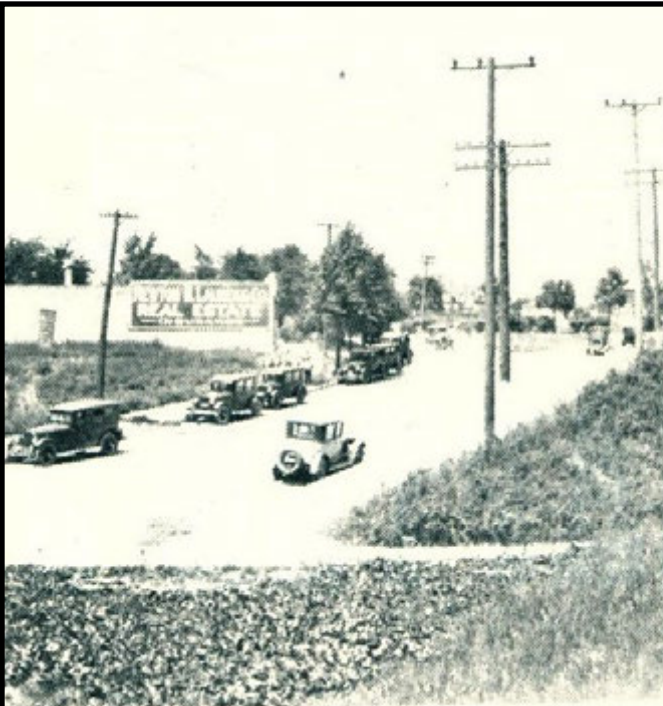
Harry E. Morgan, who had moved to Flossmoor in 1904, was one of the first real estate developers in the village. An employee of the IC, he worked as a ticket agent from 1904 to 1924 and also sold lots in the railroad’s residential subdivision. In 1926, he was responsible for the construction of the village’s first commercial building, which held a first floor store with four apartments above. This building stands at 2610 Flossmoor Road. In this building Morgan ran his own store and the village’s first post office.

In 1928, Albert Hecht, the grandson of pioneer farmer Conrad Hecht, built a two story commercial building containing a grocery store on the first floor and apartments on the second floor. This building was 1036 Sterling Avenue, currently home to Tovar Shoe Repair. Hecht operated the grocery store with his wife from 1928 until it closed in 1945.

In October 1928, the Flossmoor State Bank opened at the southwest corner of Sterling and Central Drive. The principle executives at this bank were John A. Carroll and D.J. Brumley, who was also the village’s first President. The building currently houses several small offices and storefronts.

Nick Calpino, a Flossmoor resident since 1915, opened the Calpino Hardware store in 1934, in the west end of the Flossmoor State Bank building. The business was successful and Calpino built the two-story building on the northwest corner of Park Drive and Central Avenue in 1940. He ran the hardware store out of this building until it closed in 1952. This building currently houses Yesterday’s Gentleman Barbershoppe.

All of these construction projects, along with 1929’s Civic Center, created a harmoniously aesthetic commercial district along the west side of Sterling Avenue, complimenting the train station on Sterling’s east side. The development of the Civic Center will be discussed in the following pages.



*This photo, taken in 1928, is a rare image in that it shows the west side of Sterling Avenue after commercial buildings have opened but before the Civic Center filled in the area between those buildings and the corner with Flossmoor Road.*



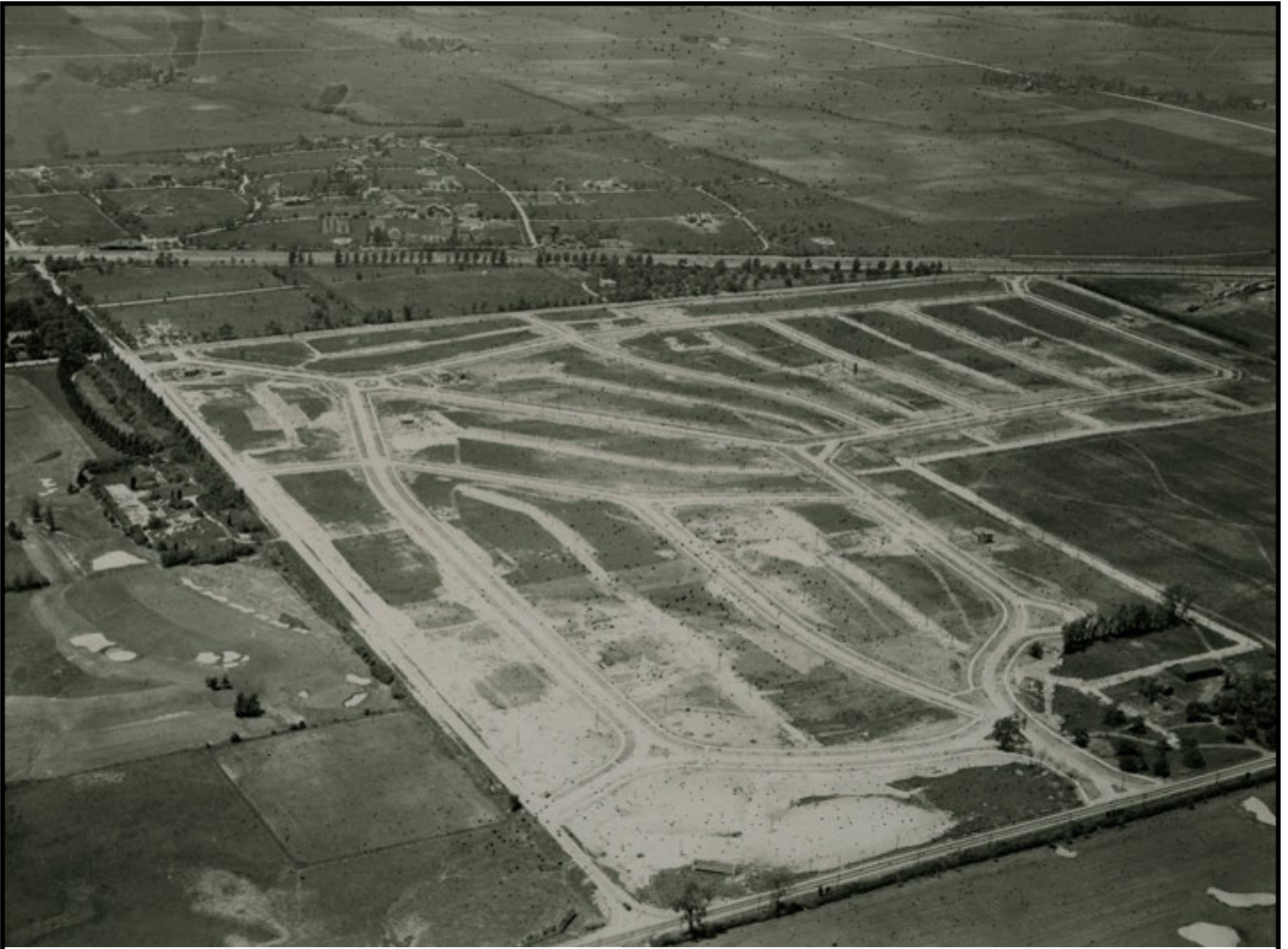
*Calpino's Hardware, 1945. Currently Yesterday's Gentleman Barbershoppe.*



*The first commercial building in Flossmoor, built in 1926 at 2610 Flossmoor Road. This building is where early villagers would pick up their mail before there was door-to-door service.*



*Left to right, Albert Hecht's grocery store, a real estate office, and the Flossmoor State Bank building in 1933.*



*The Flossmoor Park neighborhood photographed while under construction. The neighborhood was designed by the esteemed architectural firm Bennett, Parsons, & Frost, who designed Grant Park in Chicago and other civic projects throughout the country and abroad.*

*In the upper-left background of this image the area of downtown Flossmoor is visible, although it only consisted of the train station and a few scattered houses at this time.*



*The plans for the Flossmoor Park neighborhood included a Community House at the heart of the subdivision, where residents could come for social events. Flossmoor Park residents paid an extra tax to the "Flossmoor Park District" for maintenance of the building and surrounding landscaping, including the amenities along Carroll Parkway. This early Park District was a precursor to the merged H-F Park District of today.*

*In 1933 the Flossmoor Community Church bought the building for \$1 and began holding services there. In 1949 they built the current church building across the street from the Community House.*

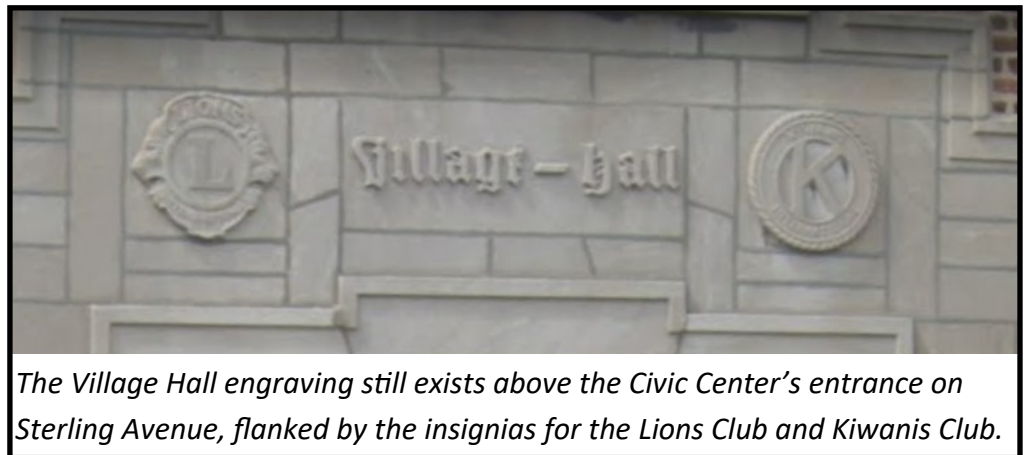
## PART THREE: THE CIVIC CENTER

Records indicate the idea of a large building on the west side of Sterling Avenue as early as 1925, but land acquisition took some time to finalize. The 1901 subdivision plat prepared by the railroad company had subdivided the area between Central Avenue and Flossmoor Road into ten lots, some with as little as 25 feet of frontage. There was also an alley designated between lots. The northernmost lots became Albert Hecht's grocery store and the Flossmoor State Bank, along with a small one-story real estate office between them. However, individual ownership of lots stymied development for the southern end of downtown for three years.

By 1928, brother real estate developers Alvin and Percy Wagner had consolidated ownership of the five southern lots and convinced the village board to abandon the alley segment that was dividing them. On this large piece of land they set out to complete Flossmoor's largest building project to date.

The Civic Center was intended to serve three purposes. The first floor would be commercial space for a variety of shops. The second floor would serve as Village Hall and house offices for various municipal departments—with the fire and police departments utilizing garage space off the back alley for their vehicles and equipment. Finally, the third floor would be rented out

as apartments. Today, one can still see evidence of the original municipal usage for this building, with the words "Village Hall" engraved over the Sterling Avenue entrance to the apartments above.

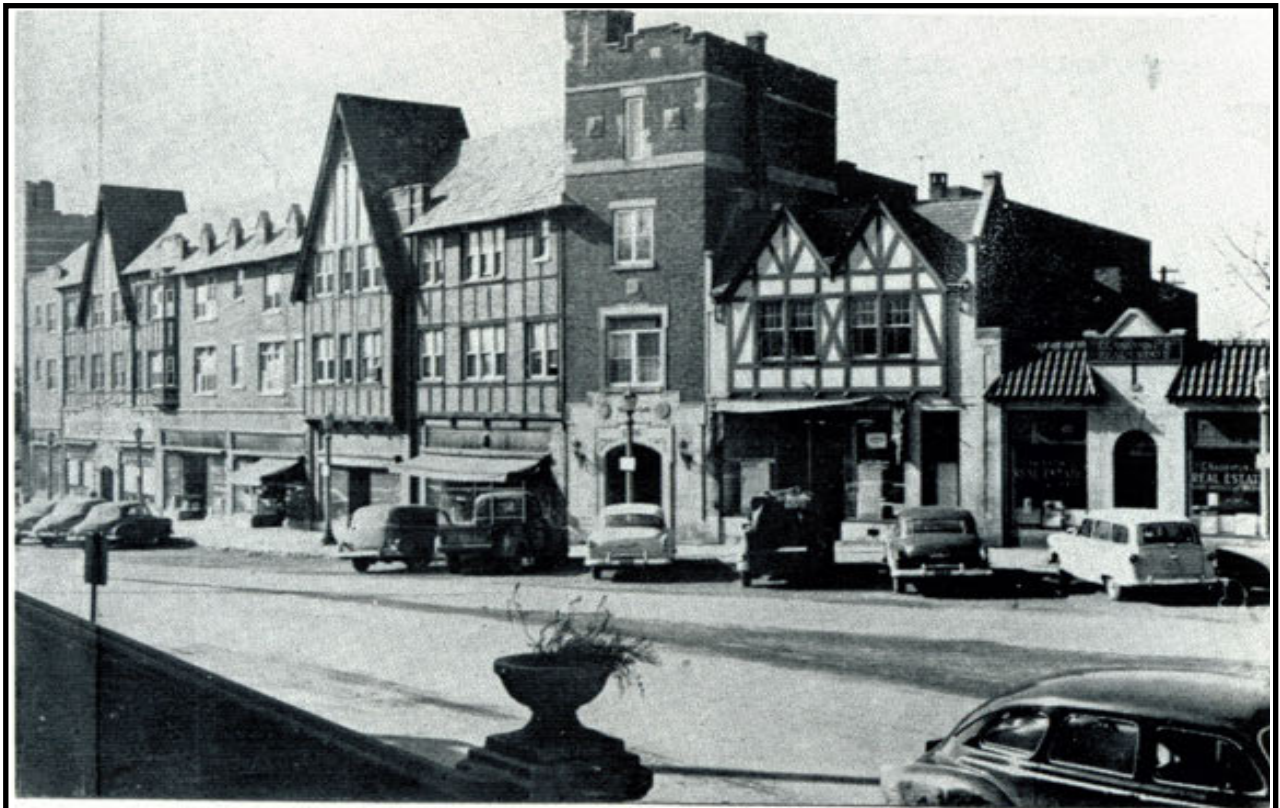


*The Village Hall engraving still exists above the Civic Center's entrance on Sterling Avenue, flanked by the insignias for the Lions Club and Kiwanis Club.*

It was reported that the construction cost for the civic center in 1929 was \$500,000, almost \$8 million in 2021 dollars. Flossmoor's population at the time hovered around 800 people so this expense clearly represented a major investment in a village of that size. Hopes were high for the new village, but the timing of the investment proved to be poor. The building opened in April 1929 and the stock market crash in October of that year led to the Great Depression.



*This 1936 image, taken from the train platform, shows the northern part of the Civic Center with the other commercial buildings extending to Central Avenue. The view looks much the same today.*



*View from the train station steps towards the south.*



## **PART FOUR: THE DEPRESSION AND WORLD WAR II**

In 1929, Flossmoor was a small village with an optimistic outlook for the future. The downtown was nearly fully developed, high-speed and clean electric trains took daily commuters to downtown Chicago for work, and new homes were being built both in the older neighborhoods and the new Flossmoor Park subdivision. Unfortunately, the momentum was brought to a halt by the Great Depression.

The owners of the brand-new Civic Center felt the pain immediately. The building opened six months before the stock market crash of 1929. Vacancy was high in the commercial spaces of the building for over a decade. Richard Condon, who was living in the building then, reports the vacant shops were used by Flossmoor youth as a roller rink and a space to do arts and crafts. He also reports a family turned one store into an apartment by painting over the shop windows for privacy. The new Flossmoor State Bank was another casualty of the Depression. The bank, which opened in 1928, went under in 1934. Through good stewardship, all depositors were able to recover 100% of their funds before the bank collapsed.

Individual citizens suffered under the Depression's economic conditions. Many men who were unemployed began riding the rails as "hobos" and passed through Flossmoor. Geraldine Nelson, a young resident at the time, reported these travelers would often come to her back door looking for food to eat. Albert Hecht's grocery store had to establish lines of credit for unemployed residents to purchase necessary food for their families.

The Great Depression officially ended in 1938, but unemployment remained over 10% until the United States entered World War II after the Pearl Harbor attack of December 1941. Like communities across the country, Flossmoor supported the effort by rationing their goods and planting "victory gardens." Over 170 men and women left Flossmoor for military service in World War II—a remarkable figure considering the village only had 1,200 residents. Of that number, six residents were killed. The local American Legion erected a Wall of Honor shortly after the end of the war. This monument stood in the traffic circle downtown before disappearing sometime in the 1950s or 1960s. In 2020, a group of citizens formed to recreate the Wall of Honor with the names of additional Flossmoor veterans from subsequent wars.

After World War II, the country and Flossmoor entered into an extended period of economic prosperity and growth.

## PART FIVE: POSTWAR BOOM AND MODERN DEVELOPMENTS

Flossmoor experienced a boom period of building and population growth in the postwar years of 1950—1970. Neighborhoods like Heather Hill, Flossmoor Hills, and Pinehurst were developed and older neighborhoods filled in more during this time. The population grew from 1,804 to 7,846 in those twenty years—the fastest period of growth in the village’s history. Flossmoor is now essentially “built out” with almost no room left for residential development, and has only added 1858 residents in the fifty years since its boom period.

While the population size has stabilized, the community has become more diverse than ever before. In 1960, the U.S. census reported Flossmoor was 99% white. In 2020, the population was reported as 59% African-American, 31% white, 5% Hispanic and 2% Asian. For a number of years, the Village has embraced multiculturalism and diversity, adding annual celebrations to honor Black History Month, Juneteenth, and Martin Luther King Jr. Day, as well as Pride Month in June. In 2021 the village elected its first female mayor, Michelle Nelson.

In recent decades, a concerted effort was made by village administration to bring more commercial development to town. Until the early 1970s, commercial activity was limited just to Flossmoor’s charming but modestly-sized downtown area. Industry is still banned in the village, so without commercial activity property tax liability on residential properties could be high. In 1971, Flossmoor Commons opened at the northeast corner of Governors Highway and Vollmer Road. This shopping center contained several storefronts and likely came close to doubling the amount of commercial activity in Flossmoor. Early shops in the Commons included Yaseen Jewelers, Miroballi Shoes, Raymond Levine’s Men’s Clothing, and Arlene’s Restaurant.

Forty-five years after Flossmoor Commons opened, another large project added to the village’s commercial base. In 2016, a Meijers “supercenter” was built at the northeast corner of Pulaski Road and Vollmer Road. Accompanying the Meijers was a Buona Beef, Starbucks, other small chain restaurants, and a gas station.

<b>Flossmoor Village Presidents and Mayors</b>	
1924—27	D.J. Brumley
1927—29	A.F. Hunt
1929—31	Warren Vandersluis
1931—33	Dr. William Miller
1933—35	E.C. Herthel
1935—41	William P. Metzler
1941—44	E.G. McGowen
1944—49	John S. Perry
1949—53	Lawrence S. Myers
1953—61	Fred N. Gundrum, Jr.
1961—69	W. Robert Riggs
1969—73	Bryce C. Boothby
1973—89	Bert H. Reed, Jr.
1989—94	Frank J. Maher Jr.
1994—2009	Roger Molski
2009—21	Paul S. Braun
2021—	Michelle Nelson



**1928 at the viaduct.**



**1946 at Leavitt School/Park area**

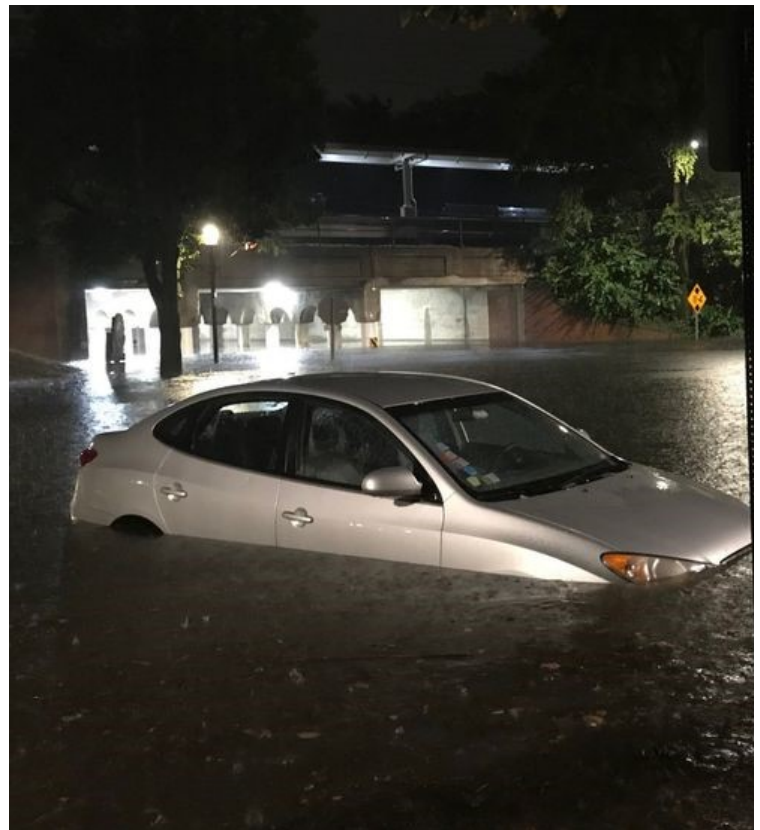


**1951—Boating through downtown.**

Periodic flooding has been a nuisance for residents and business owners since the start of Flossmoor. When Flossmoor Road was lowered to pass under the Illinois Central tracks, it created a depression where rainwater will collect and sometimes overwhelm the drainage system.

In his reminiscences, Richard Condon wrote of the flood of 1947, which deposited fourteen feet of water in the Civic Center’s basement. A fire truck was called in to pump almost two million gallons of water from the building. He writes, *“What added to the problem was [soap] stored in the basement of the then Sterling Food Market...quickly dissolved and mounds of soapsuds poured into the street.”*

Village administration continues to work on the flooding issues and received a \$1.5 million grant to work on downtown flooding in 2020.



**A 2019 flood ravages downtown.**

**Photo by Paul Eisenberg/Daily Southtown**

## PART SIX: VILLAGE HALLS #2 AND #3

After the Civic Center opened in 1929, the village was offered a 25 year rent-free lease on offices on the second floor and garage spaces in the back alley. As that lease was nearing its end, the village administration decided it was time to pursue other options. They decided to build a new facility that would be more suitable for their needs. This new village hall opened in 1951.

The 1951 village hall was built in a colonial style on the north side of the traffic circle downtown. The new building was a massive upgrade for the village, especially the fire department and police department.

By the late 1970s, Village Hall #2 was considered too small and outdated for the village's needs, so Village Hall #3 was built. This hall is still in use on Flossmoor Road. The 1951 building was given to the library to use. The library used the old village hall for another 20 years, until the 50-year old building was deemed inadequate for library services in the digital age. The building was torn down and the new library was built in its space in 2004.



*One of the shortcomings of the Civic Center was the fire department being placed in the narrow back alley. It required the engine to make three point turns to enter and exit the garage—not great in an emergency.*



*The 1951 Village Hall, sitting where the current library building is at the north edge of downtown. The building had wings for the fire department and police department that provided easy exits from garage spaces.*

## PART SEVEN: EDUCATION

The first educational buildings in Flossmoor were two one-room schoolhouses on Dixie Highway and Kedzie Avenue. Leavitt Avenue School was built in 1923 on the land that Leavitt Park currently occupies. This school was enlarged in 1928 and 1938—by which time the one room schoolhouses were no longer used for daily activities by the district.



*Flossmoor first grade class in 1929.*

As the population increased in the district, more public schools were added. Western Avenue Elementary opened in 1948; Flossmoor Junior High in 1954 (renamed Mardell M. Parker Junior High in 1985); Flossmoor Hills in 1960; Serena Hills in 1961; Normandy Villa in 1966; and Heather Hill in 1968.

At first, Flossmoor schools only provided up to an eighth grade education in-town. After that, students were divided geographically for their high school years. Students east of Western Avenue attended Bloom Township High School in Chicago Heights. Students west of Western Avenue had to ride the Illinois Central Railroad to Harvey, where they then walked half a mile to Thornton Township High School.

The long commutes and the division of Flossmoor teens was seen as a negative and parents in both Flossmoor and Homewood formed a committee to solve the issue. Citizens for a Homewood-Flossmoor High School held its first public meeting in September 1954, with more than five hundred residents attending. After a couple legal setbacks, H-F High School opened in September 1959 with 1,170 students. The student population continued to grow, reaching 3,585 students in 1968, so the North Building was added to campus in 1971.

In addition to the public schools, Infant Jesus of Prague has offered a parochial school alternative since September 1958. IJP School started with 247 students but grew to 840 students by the end of the 1960s. Students graduating 8th grade from IJP often went on to Marian Catholic High School in Chicago Heights.

# POSTSCRIPT: THE END OF THE ILLINOIS CENTRAL RAILROAD

Today the IC Railroad—founded in 1836— is but a memory. As the company had such a crucial hand in the development of Flossmoor—laying out the first neighborhood, selling residential lots, forming the downtown area—the history of Flossmoor is entwined with the history of the IC itself.

The IC tracks bisecting town serve three functions: freight trains, long-distance travel, and commuter trains to and from downtown Chicago. Illinois Central's commuter trains were electrified in 1926, leading to this section being known as the "electric district." The long-distance and freight trains passing through Flossmoor were not electrified.

The IC's long-distance passenger trains were considered a luxury experience in the early 20th Century. A local Flossmoor resident could board the IC's *Panama Limited* train in Homewood and travel all the way to New Orleans in comfortable Pullman sleeping cars. This service began in 1911 with coal-burning engines. In 1936, the engines were replaced by sleek diesel-powered streamliners. In 1947, the IC started offering a second, more affordable coach trip to New Orleans on a train called *The City of New Orleans*. Both of these lines were transferred to Amtrak, a national rail company set up by the federal government, in 1971. Around this time, *The City of New Orleans* gained fame as the subject and title of a popular folk song written by Chicagoan Steve Goodman that ruminated on the decline of the passenger rail era in America. *The Panama Limited* ceased operations in 1981, but *The City of New Orleans* still passes through town every night around 9 PM.

After Amtrak's formation in 1971, the IC still ran local commuter trains and freight. In 1987, they sold their commuter operations to the newly-formed Metra system, which began operating the line as the Metra Electric District. Finally, the IC sold off its freight operations to Canadian National Railway for \$2.4 billion in 1999. Now out of the railroad business completely, the Illinois Central renamed itself The Whitman Corporation and began focusing on other ventures.

The landmark IC station, built in 1906, ceased being used as a passenger waiting room when an island platform was built for commuters. The building housed small stores from the late 1970s to the early 1990s, but fell into disrepair. Finally, in 1996, Flossmoor natives Dean and Carolyn Armstrong renovated the building to open Flossmoor Station Restaurant and Brewery, an award-winning brewpub that celebrated its 25th Anniversary in 2021.



*Illinois Central steam engine #201 ran local commuter routes through Flossmoor before electrification in 1926. It is believed that famed engineer Casey Jones drove this locomotive during the 1893 World's Fair in Chicago. It is currently on display at the Illinois Railroad Museum in Union.*



*An early photo of the IC passenger depot, now Flossmoor Station Restaurant and Brewery.*



*The Panama Limited streamliner, which traveled through Flossmoor on the way to New Orleans. Streamliners replaced steam engines in 1936.*



*In addition to downtown Chicago, the Electric District trains stops in the Hyde Park neighborhood, home of the University of Chicago. This has led to a long tradition of University of Chicago professors and employees settling in Flossmoor, a culturally enriching connection for the village over the decades.*



*Ri- ding on the Ci- ty of New Or- leans,*

*Illi- nois Cen- tral Mon- day mor- ning rail,*

## WORKS USED

Three major volumes of Flossmoor history have been published over the years. They are:

Adair, Anna B., and Sandberg, Adele. Indian Trails to Tollways: The Story of the Homewood-Flossmoor Area. Fremouw Press, 1968

Kabbes, Elise D., and GiaQuinta, Mary. Images of America: Flossmoor, Illinois. Arcadia Publishing, 1999.

Wagner, Susan F. A History of the Village of Flossmoor 1851—1974. Flossmoor Historical Committee, 1974.

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In addition to the above works, the following articles, websites and resources were consulted:

“Illinois Central Railroad.” website at [www.wikipedia.org](http://www.wikipedia.org)

“Illinois Central Railroad: ‘The Main Line of Mid-America’” website at [www.american-rails.com](http://www.american-rails.com)

Mehaffey, Scott. “Local History: The Origins of Flossmoor.” H-F Chronicle. 30 March 2018.

Swatek, Bonnie J. The History of School District 161 1860-1928. July 1989.

Various newspaper clippings and handwritten remembrances in the collection of the Flossmoor Public Library Historical Archives