



# THE ILES FILES

The Newsletter of the Elijah Iles House Foundation

Ileshouse.org **June 2024**

FACEBOOK.COM/IlesHouse/

## YOU ARE CORDIALLY INVITED TO MRS. CLARA C. IRWIN'S STRAWBERRY AND LAWN PARTY AT THE ILES HOUSE ON THURSDAY, JULY 4, 2024

*By Linda Garvert, Iles House Curator*

Who is this Clara C. Irwin? Why, she was the wife of Robert Irwin, the successful merchant, banker, and political enthusiast, close friend of Abraham Lincoln and the purchaser in 1841 of Elijah Iles's house on the corner of 6<sup>th</sup> and Cook streets in Springfield. History hasn't provided us with a lot about Clara. She didn't leave letters or journals behind, and the newspapers of the day rarely covered the social scene. Clara was remembered, however, in an 1889 newspaper obituary about her niece. It referred to her aunt as "the late Mrs. Robert Irwin, known for fifty years in the social circles of Springfield." Knowing that her husband enjoyed being around his business and political friends, we are sure Clara was called upon to host social gatherings in their home. It is likely that two of the Irwins' daughters provided some musical entertainment for guests, as both Lillie and Ella were talented at the piano and harp.

Robert and Clara were married in 1833 in St. Louis. Clara was born in 1815 in Philadelphia to Charles Doyle and his wife Helen (Williams). In January 1834 the couple moved to Springfield, where Robert went into partnership with John Williams, Iles's former store clerk. The story is told that the trip to Springfield had a hazard. The Mississippi River wasn't yet frozen solid, and the couple had to jump over cracks in the ice to get ashore. The ride to Springfield was a two-day trip by stagecoach. It is believed Clara was about 8 months pregnant with her first daughter at that time.

### June 15th and July 4th!

On Saturday 15 June, at 4:00 p.m., after regular house tours, Bill Furry will host a showing of the acclaimed one-hour film *The Mysterious Bard of Sangamo* (2021), a true tale about an 1830s Springfield poet. The story was filmed almost entirely in the Iles House. Free iced tea, lemonade, and popcorn.

*Live Music on the Fourth of July*

**Peaches and Bacon** (William Wilkie and Elizabeth Buchta) will play old-timey music, 3:30 to 5:30 p.m. They will be fresh off of a barn dance in McNabb, Illinois, at the Friends (Quakers) Meeting, and back with us by popular demand. During their break we will all share in a reading of the *Declaration of Independence*.

Food & drink, 3:00-6:00 p.m. Come!

In all, the couple had five children. Eliza J., known as Lillie, was their first. Clara Catherine, named for her mother, lived to only about seven years old. The third daughter, Sarah Ella, (cont. on p. 2)



*No photo of Clara has been found, but this silhouette ...*

Open Saturdays, Noon to 4:00 p.m., April 27 to October 12, 2024. 628 S. 7th St., at Cook St.

Mail: EIH Foundation, P.O. Box 144, Springfield, Ill. 62705 Videos, etc.: [ileshouse.org](http://ileshouse.org) [Ileshouse1998@gmail.com](mailto:Ileshouse1998@gmail.com)


**Clara Irwin, from p. 1** was the only one to outlive her parents. Their only son, Robert T., was born just 29 days after the death of Clara Catherine; he lived to be 32. Kate, the fifth child, but with the full name of Clara Catherine, lived only about 16 months.

The Irwins lived a comfortable life in the “Iles House.” They had installed a furnace in the late 1850s and usually had two servants. It is recorded that Robert entertained at the house with the game of euche, guests including such city notables as Dr. Elias Mer-ryman, Nicolas Ridgely, and Abraham Lincoln. Politician Orville Hickman Browning of Quincy noted in his diary attending a June 4<sup>th</sup> evening event at the Irwin home.

The Irwins owned the entire block of land on which their house sat, bordered by Cook, 6<sup>th</sup>, Douglas, and 7<sup>th</sup> streets. A large part of the block was used for an orchard and gardens. Both Clara and Robert had an interest in horticulture, Robert being one of the founding members of the local Horticultural

Society (men only as members, but wives participated).

So why have we chosen the Iles House strawberry party to honor Clara C. Irwin? In a letter by Mary Lincoln to her friend Hannan Shearer, she tells: "For the last two weeks, we have had a continual round of strawberry parties, this last week I have spent five evenings out -- and you may suppose, that this day of rest, I am happy to enjoy. . . This last week, we gave a strawberry company of about seventy . . . After raspberry time, we will resume, doubtless our usual quiet."

 Mrs. Robert Irwin will please accept our thanks for a basket of delicious grapes and magnificent pears, which she has been so kind as to send. We have seen much of the fruit from many of the excellent orchards and gardens in and around Springfield, but nothing equal to the basket full sent us by Mrs. Irwin.

*News item in the October 9, 1863 Ill. State Journal*

Thus we know that strawberry parties were popular in the Irwin neighborhood. We also learn from the newspaper that at the Springfield Horticultural Society’s 8<sup>th</sup> annual festival, in 1858, Clara was one of five ladies recognized. “We noticed some enormous specimens of strawberries, contributed by Mrs. A. J. Kane; Mrs. Robert Irwin; Mrs. B. S. Edwards; Mrs. John C. Maxey; and Mrs. F. Springer.”

*Is your membership current?*

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*Dear Friends* — Please renew your membership for 2024. We know that some of you have abided by the old custom of renewing at the time of the Strawberry Party on the 4th of July, and those renewals are tracked and counted, too. Whether it has been 1 year, or 18 months, or more, since your last note to us, thank you for keeping us in your plans. A separate Dick Hart Memorial Fund is also accounted for.

Elijah Iles House Foundation, P.O. Box 144, Springfield, Illinois 62705.

Membership categories:

Individual	\$25	Household	\$50
Benefactor	\$100	Steward	\$500
Trustee	\$1,000		

The EIHF is a registered 501(c)(3) charitable organization in the State of Illinois. It operates only with volunteer help and through private donations.

Name :

\_\_\_\_\_

Address :

\_\_\_\_\_

City, State, Zip:

\_\_\_\_\_

Email or phone:

\_\_\_\_\_

*Elijah & Malinda say 'thanks'!*

## The Porch Chats Held in May



**Mark McDonald** — May 1st, everyone's favorite public tv history host (and a current board member), on his 20+ year career of hosting *Illinois Stories* as well as his new tv venture.

**Mary Frances** — May 15th, Heritage Press co-author of *African Americans in Springfield*, on that book as well as her work-in-progress about noted local photographer Doc Helm.



**Mike Dunbar** — May 29th, the EIHf founder and charter president, on our formation 30 years ago, early fundraising, and moving the Iles House to its present site. Mike was presented

with a framed drawing of the House (by Springfield's noted artist Bill Crook), as a symbol of how much he had done for both the House and for Springfield.

All talks were filmed and will be viewable from our website later this year.

It was so much fun ... we'll host more chats again!

## **Ann Hart, *r.i.p.***

With the passing of Ann Hart on 7 April 2024, the decision was reached, and not difficult to make, to rededicate the gifts that support the spring and fall Porch Chats as the Dick and Ann Hart Memorial Fund. These generous friends of Ann have just contributed:

Leslie Ashbaugh (Ormond Beach, Fla.); Judith Barringer; Mike and Karen Beckman; Cathy and Dennis Bringuet; Chatham (Ill.) Presbyterian Church; Kathy & Randy Germeraad; Carol and Phil Graham; Don and Pat Graham; M. G. Nelson; Patricia Palmer (Corning, Ark.); Rick Renner; Ronald R. Smith; Robert A. Stuart, Jr.; Tom Tierney (Newton, N.J.); Don and Wanda Tracy; Sara Vanhala; Arie and Laura VanProyen; Ron and Rita Wilson (Lincoln, Ill.); Barbara and William Zillman (Chicago); and Richard and Linda Zuhlke.

The Elijah Iles House Foundation board sent our formal condolences to the Harts' children, Evan, Julia (Nickerson), and Jay.

*We also thank those who have recently renewed their membership: Francie Staggs, The Germeraads, The Tracys*

Elijah Iles House Foundation

P. O. Box 144

Springfield, Illinois 62705

The Iles / Irwin block; 1872 map



## New Exhibit in the Farrell & Ann Gay Museum of Springfield History

*Right: Devoted, veteran, volunteer docents Betty Ann Poage and Larry Buhl in the lower level of the Iles House at the new display, just installed by Linda Garvert, curator of the Iles House.*

“Growing Springfield” is the theme, telling a series of stories of how Springfield grew from prairie village to modern metropolis. With historical photographs and maps, follow the development of Springfield’s infrastructure and public institutions — ensuring a reliable, safe water system, to the development of effective police and fire departments. Also traced are the efforts to bury the Town Branch storm sewer, the transformation of city streets from rutted mud tracks to paved thoroughfares lighted by gas and later by electricity, the construction of city libraries, and the growth of public transportation.



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*The Elijah Iles House Foundation board:* David Barringer (president), James M. Cornelius, Bill Furry, Richard F. Herndon (membership), Mark McDonald, Logan McMinn (v.p.), James W. Patton III, Ron Stevens (treasurer), Connie Sims (secretary), and Kay Smith.