



## History of Macomb

The history of Macomb, located on the old “Burlington Trail” to Burlington, Iowa, is inextricably interwoven with that of McDonough County whose majestic courthouse dominated Macomb’s square. Both the city and the county were named for heroes of the War of 1812, General Alexander Macomb and Commodore McDonough, who later defeated the British at Lake Champlain. The whole area was part of what was termed the Military tract, grants of land set aside for those who volunteered for service in the War of 1812. McDonough County’s present boundaries were set up in 1826. Even then, though the county had its name and boundaries, the administration and tax collection were left in the hands of Schuyler County officials until the new county should gain a population of 350.

In the spring of 1829 Reverend John Baker, a Baptist minister, built the first log cabin on the corner of what is now West Jefferson and South Johnson Streets. The cabin was not far from the exact center of McDonough County, which is at the corner of West Piper and South Johnson Streets. In 1830, a court order issued at Rushville recognized that the county had the necessary population for county government and an election for county commissioners was held. These commissioners held the “seat of justice” at the hut of John Baker, then the only house standing on the site of what is now Macomb. In December of 1830, James Clarke was sent to Springfield to get the title of the quarter section on which the Baker house was located. He did this, getting caught in a terrible snowstorm on his way back, and receiving the sum of three dollars for his trouble.

The Baker house served as a tavern, grocery, courthouse and clerk’s office until a new courthouse was built. The site had been given the tentative name of Washington, but the state legislature, meeting in Vandalia in December 1830 passed an act locating the county seat for McDonough and giving the county seat the name of Macomb.

Three courthouses have been built in different stages in Macomb’s history, all being erected at the same location where the present one stands today. The first courthouse, made of logs, was built in 1831 at a cost of under \$70. The second building, erected in 1838, was a brick structure costing around \$8,000. In 1860, Judge C.L. Higbee was addressing a political meeting at the courthouse when the building began to crack. The crowd dispersed very quickly, and after that, it was almost impossible to retain any audience. Contracts for the present courthouse were held in 1868. Together, with its furnishings, the present structure cost approximately \$155,000.

Education in Macomb began in 1834 when a one-room log school house was opened as a private school. Each pupil’s tuition cost the parents \$1 in cash and \$3 in merchandise or produce. In 1835 McDonough College was established. The undertaking proved a failure as did four successive attempts by various groups. All were short lived. Finally in 1899 Western State Normal School, now known as Western Illinois University, was established on a campus of approximately 70 acres on the edge of the city.

Before streets and roads were paved, people were often forced to use “mudboats” like scows, drawn by mules or oxen, to come to town since no horse drawn vehicles could get through the deep mud.

One of the early industries of Macomb was the Tinsley Flour Mill, where such excellent flour was made that it was sold quite extensively, much of it in St. Louis. Flour was then sold in barrels, and the Tinsley Mill located on South Randolph Street, had its own copper shop and made its own barrels. Other early industries included a brick manufacturing plant and woolen mill.

For additional information on the community and business opportunities, please contact the Macomb Area Chamber of Commerce and Downtown Development Corporation at (309)837-4855 or [www.macombareachamber.com](http://www.macombareachamber.com).