

The History Corner By Beth Carvey  
**David Sears House**

Visitors to Black Hawk State Historic Site often wonder about the large, two story house located at the southwestern edge of the Site, west of the prairie and on top of the hill. Visitors ask: “What is that house for? Who lives there?” The short answer is that the house belongs to the State of Illinois and has served as the residence of the Site Manager (Park Custodian) since the Park was first created in 1928. But as with most questions, the short answer leaves out a lot of interesting information. The house was built in 1882 by David Sears, an early settler in the Quad City area.

David Sears moved to the area in 1836. He and two partners built the first dam on the Mississippi River. The dam stretched from the eastern end of Rocky (Arsenal) Island to the Moline shore. The partners operated a grist and saw mill, drawing power from the dam. Sears purchased about 35 acres on Rocky Island and constructed several buildings there. In 1867, the United States government bought out Sears, paying him over \$145,000 for his property and improvements. Shortly thereafter Sears moved to Vandruff’s Island and purchased several hundred acres which included land on the north shore of Rock River. He platted a town, called Searstown, that extended from the Rock River north to 44<sup>th</sup> Avenue and from 9<sup>th</sup> Street on the west to 14<sup>th</sup> Street on the east. This stretch of land had once been the site of the great Sauk city of Saukenuk. Sears built a dam across the Rock River at the foot of the rapids and constructed a flouring mill. Soon other manufacturing businesses were opened along the river, drawing their power from the Sears dam. The population of Searstown began to grow, many of the residents working at the businesses along the river.

Sears left the area in 1871, returning in 1878 with a new wife (his fourth), Margaret J. Merchant. By 1882 Sears had built a home for them that overlooked Searstown and the Rock and Mississippi River valleys. It was a modern home, an excellent example of the popular Victorian architectural style. Its wide eaves with brackets, hip roof, long Italianate-style windows, double bay window, and double back porch--complete with balustrade around the second story and gingerbread trim--all spoke to the fashionability of the home. Their homestead comprised about 10 acres. (Their property line extended east to the present-day Lodge west parking lot.) They kept livestock and had a large garden requiring the use of a plow.

David Sears died in 1884. Margaret continued to live in the house until her death in 1889. Upon her death, the house and property were purchased by Bailey Davenport, owner of the Watch Tower Park that was located directly east of the Sears homestead. Davenport built a six room addition onto the house and intended to use it as a summer hotel to accommodate visitors to the Watch Tower. When Davenport died in 1891, the house and land were inherited by his nieces. In 1905, they sold the property to the Tri-City Railway Company (who, incidentally, had purchased the Watch Tower Park from Davenport’s estate in 1891 and created the first and largest amusement park west of Chicago—but that’s another story). For the next twenty years the house was used as rental property.

In 1927, the State of Illinois purchased 200 acres of land from the Tri-City Railway Company and created Black Hawk State Park. The Sears house was included in the transaction. At the time of purchase, the house was described as a twelve-room house and was valued at \$4400. The State completely remodeled the house for use as the residence for the park custodian. The 1889 six room addition was removed (though the foundation of the addition still remains) and the house was gutted. New electrical wiring, plumbing, and a coal furnace were added during the remodeling process. Luckily, the exterior of the original 1882 house was left intact. In 1928, William Hoyt, first park custodian, moved into the newly remodeled home. Over the last 83 years many site custodians and their families have called the old Sears house “home.”