

The News-Gazette®

*The* United States of  
**AMERICA**  
*@250*



*The* American flag has been recognized across the globe as a symbol of freedom for centuries. While the current Stars and Stripes is most familiar to billions of people worldwide, the flag has undergone many changes since the United States declared its independence from Great Britain. According to the National Flag Foundation, Old Glory has been revised 27 times in the two-and-a-half centuries since American colonists fought for and won independence from British rule. Of course, most times, those changes occurred as a new state or states joined the union, with each addition marked by the inclusion of another star in the blue field in the upper-left quadrant. The initial 1777 flag included 13 stars denoting the original 13 colonies, which eventually became the first 13 states. Similarly, the modern flag now features 50 stars representing the current 50 states – and it has remained unchanged since July 4, 1960, when the 50th star was added in recognition of Hawaii's 1959 admittance as the 50th state in the Union.

AMERICA at 250

# STAR-SPANGLLED STORIES

Happy 250th, America. ¶ To mark the occasion, Editor **JEFF D'ALESSIO** asked dozens of community members to share a memory about the time they were proudest to call this country home. ¶ There's much more to come in the days ahead, including in Friday's special Weekend Extra edition. ¶ To join in on the fun, email your patriotic prose to [jdalessio@news-gazette.com](mailto:jdalessio@news-gazette.com).

**'I am proud of this country when we embrace the idea that people from everywhere have gifts and talents to offer'**

**ROAA AL-HEETI**  
Champaign attorney

I am happiest and proudest to be an American when I guide people through the U.S. immigration system. Over the past 19 years, I have helped spouses reunite through family-based immigration, helped young people build careers with the work authorization that can accompany DACA, and helped U.S. employers hire some of the most talented people in the world to strengthen their businesses.

I am proud of this country when we embrace the idea that people from everywhere have gifts and talents to offer, and give them the opportunity to live and work here for the benefit of both the immigrant and the United States.

The process is far more difficult, expensive and time-consuming than most people imagine — and that is when a path exists at all. That makes the moments when it works, and the lives it changes, all the more meaningful to me.

I also know this journey personally. My late husband immigrated to the United States, obtained permanent residency and eventually became a U.S. citizen and voted in an American election. Watching him take part in the country he chose to call home was one of the proudest experiences of my life, and it is something I carry with me in every case I take on today.

**'A poor Black kid from a small Kansas town, raised by a single mother who only had a GED, had a chance to build an impactful life'**

**HOWARD MILTON**  
Illini athletics'  
chief development officer



I was most proud of being an American in 1998 when I finally completed my formal education.

Because I'm an American citizen, I was able to receive a federal Pell Grant, along with various federal loans. Without these programs, my life would be much different today. After completing my master's degree, I was overcome with



Robin Scholz/The News-Gazette

**'Champaign always made you proud to be a citizen of our community, state and country'**

**DEENA CARICO**  
Mansfield mayor

I grew up in Champaign. My best memories of our country at its finest are Fourth of July celebrations that took place each year.

We would start with the parade, which at that time went down Green Street. We would stand across from the Dairy Queen and watch all the floats and bands and vehicles drive down the road.

It would be extra special if my dad was working at the Champaign Fire Department that day and we would see him on the fire truck. Everyone was so respectful and in full red, white and blue clothing.

After the parade, there was always a picnic at the park before we would head to the stadium for the fireworks. Champaign always made you proud to be a citizen of our community, state and country. The patriotic music would be playing all day; there would be flags waving on streets and houses.

The fireworks were the cherry on the top for the evening. Yes, I was much younger, but I still had a sense that we were all proud to be Americans and neighbors.

**'Wherever I traveled, I felt that Americans were welcomed and that our nation was admired and respected'**

**JOE RANK**

Retired Navy commander and Urbana resident

June 13, 1969, was the day I was commissioned as an ensign in the U.S. Navy after graduating from the University of Illinois. As a young officer ready to take on the world, I began a 20-year naval career that took me throughout Asia, Europe and South America.

Wherever I traveled, I felt that Americans were welcomed and that our nation was admired and respected. In my view, the United States' standing among the world's democracies reached its peak at the end of the Cold War.

"In recent years, some of our actions have diminished that reputation. I remain hopeful, however, that we can once again be recognized as a beacon of democracy, opportunity and principled leadership.



emotion, realizing that a poor Black kid from a small Kansas town, raised by a single mother who only had a GED, had a chance to build an impactful life.

While I'm not always happy with our country, I'm always proud of the opportunities it provides and proud to be an American.

**'So relieved and happy to be home again with my family in the good ol' U-S-of-A'**

**BEN DYER**  
Champaign County  
circuit judge

On July 3, 2005, I returned to the United States after spending a year teaching high school science in eastern Honduras. Although I'd met many wonderful people in Honduras, it was also the first



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time I'd lived in a place where the rule of law was not a given.

For all of its virtues, Honduras suffers from significant corruption, poverty and violence, and parts of my time there had been very hard.

The next day, my family took me to a big Fourth of July pic-

nic, where the North Carolina Symphony played. As it got dark, I remember looking up at the fireworks exploding above the tall pine trees, listening to beautiful music and feeling so relieved and happy to be home again with my family in the good ol' U-S-of-A. I also recall being much less concerned than other attendees about the ravenous mosquitoes because I knew I wasn't going to get dengue fever (again).

**'We rallied around one another as neighbors and as fellow Americans'**

**JEWELL WHITE**  
Assistant dean,  
UI Gies College of Business

I don't think there has been another day in my lifetime that made me prouder to be an American than seeing our country

respond to the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001.

The tragedy itself was heartbreaking, but what I remember most is what came afterward. For a brief time, people set aside political differences, personal disagreements and the things that so often divide us. We rallied around one another as neighbors and as fellow Americans. We saw extraordinary courage from first responders, volunteers, members of the military and ordinary citizens who simply wanted to help.

What made me proud wasn't the event itself — it was the response. It reminded me that at our best, Americans are resilient, compassionate and willing to sacrifice for something greater than ourselves.

I've always hoped we could rediscover that same sense of unity without having to endure another national tragedy first.



# Happy 250th Birthday, USA!

Congratulations to the United States of America on 250 years of independence, resilience, innovation, and hope. From the ideals that shaped the nation's founding to the generations who have worked to expand freedom, opportunity, and unity, this milestone is a powerful moment to honor the past and look toward the future.

May this 250th birthday be a celebration of the American spirit--bold, diverse, determined, and always striving toward a more perfect union. Happy birthday, USA!

With extreme Gratitude  
Habeb Habeb and Family



*The* United States of  
**AMERICA @250**

# AMERICA at 250



Photos provided

**'What I find most beautiful about America is not our sameness, but our diversity'**

**KAITLIN FISHER**

Champaign police lieutenant

The moments that make me proudest to be an American aren't the ones that make headlines. They're the everyday moments that remind me how unique this country truly is.

As a police officer, I interact with people from all walks of life. We come from different backgrounds, hold different beliefs and often see the world through very different lenses. We don't always agree, and sometimes those differences can feel bigger than what brings us together. Yet one of the things I value most about America is that we are free to express those differences openly.

What a privilege it is to be able to speak your mind, share your beliefs and engage in public conversation through whatever medium you choose without fear of persecution from your own government. Around the world and throughout history, that freedom has not been and is not a given — something

that is sometimes forgotten or overlooked. It is a freedom worth appreciating and protecting.

What I find most beautiful about America is not our sameness, but our diversity. The American experience is enriched by people with different cultures, faiths, traditions and perspectives. I believe we are strongest when we treat one another with respect, even when we disagree. We don't have to think alike to care about one another, and our differences often challenge us to grow and see the world in new ways.

That everyday commitment to freedom, mutual respect and unity amid diversity is what makes me proud to be an American.

**'We could not scoop our new, limited-edition flavor — Lunar Cheesecake — until the astronauts landed safely'**

**JOAN DYKSTRA**

Savoy village trustee

As a teenager working the Sunday afternoon shift at Baskin-Robbins in Rockford, staff and customers were excited, yet anxious, as we waited for news of Apollo 11.



We were under strict orders: we could not scoop our new, limited-edition flavor — Lunar Cheesecake — until the astronauts landed safely. At 4:17 p.m., the Eagle touched down, and we proudly put out the tub.

That night, my family watched as Neil Armstrong stepped down onto the lunar surface and uttered the famous words: "That's one small step for (a) man, one giant leap for mankind."

I was in awe of the courage shown by Armstrong, "Buzz" Aldrin and Michael Collins, and deeply proud to belong to a country that could achieve such spectacular heights.



**'The day my dad pinned Navy Wings of Gold on my chest'**

**JOE TANNER**

Danville High School alum and recently inducted U.S. Astronaut Hall of Famer

"The day I felt most proud to be an American was March 7, 1975. That was the day my dad pinned Navy Wings of Gold on my chest, making me a Naval aviator.

"I was proud because I had finished arduous training qualifying me to serve my country and protect it with my life if necessary.

"Of course, I was very proud to serve our country on the four space shuttle missions, but that emotion did not compare to the pride of earning my Navy Wings."

**'Please accept this flag as a symbol of our appreciation for your loved one's honorable and faithful service'**

**BILL INGOLD**

Paxton mayor

I am a member of Paxton Prairie Post 150 of the American Legion and one of my proudest moments is when our Honor Guard is asked to perform military rites at a veteran's funeral.

To show honor and respect to the veteran who has shown the dedication to serve and to defend his or her country is our reason and our duty to provide this service.

It is folding the flag, calling commands for the detail or the 21-gun salute that fills us with pride each time we are asked to be a part of the funeral ceremony.

I have been privileged to present the folded flag to the next of kin a few times and the emotion can be overwhelming, only to be exceeded by the playing of taps: "On behalf of the president of the United States, the United States (insert branch) and a grateful nation, please accept this flag as a symbol of our appreciation for your loved one's honorable and faithful service."

If you know and you have been a part of this, you would agree this is a very proud moment.



# LET FREEDOM RING

# 250

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and our Posterity, do ordain and establish  
Article 1

## CELEBRATING 250 YEARS OF INDEPENDENCE ON JULY 4TH

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## AMERICA at 250

**'It was extra cool to have a bicentennial baby in the family'****JEN SHELBY**President,  
Flyover Film Studios

A childhood memory has come to mind so many times lately: the Champaign-Urbana Fourth of July parade in 1976.

Back then, the parade went down Green Street and right in front of Steak 'n Shake. I was with my younger brother and my grandparents — I am fairly sure that my sister, who was just born earlier that year, stayed home.

Anyway, we got our trusty carryout from Steak 'n Shake and headed to the curb.

I remember the parade being huge and filled with things like the Shriners on tiny bikes or in tiny cars or something fun.

I checked: It was one of the largest crowds ever at our parade — 75,000 to 100,000 people attended that day. I was young but there was a sense of community and a sense of pride in the U.S., and celebrating the bicentennial was important and meant something, although I guess I wasn't exactly sure what.

It was extra cool to have a bicentennial baby in the family that year and I think virtually everything she wore was red, white and blue.

After the parade, we spent the evening with the Kemper family, as we did for years and years. The highlight of every one of those gatherings was Mrs. Kemper's homemade vanilla ice cream served with a real silver spoon — it's colder — and my grandmother's chocolate cookies.

It is one of those unjaded, perfect childhood moments that has stuck with me for all these years.

**'When we all vote, we do not vote only for ourselves. We vote for our families, our neighbors and those whose voices are not yet fully represented'****KANITTHA FAY**

Managing director, We Love Urbana

The happiest day of my life as an American was Nov. 6, 2012, the day I took my third-grade daughter to the polling place to watch me vote for the very first time as a proud U.S. citizen exercising my right.

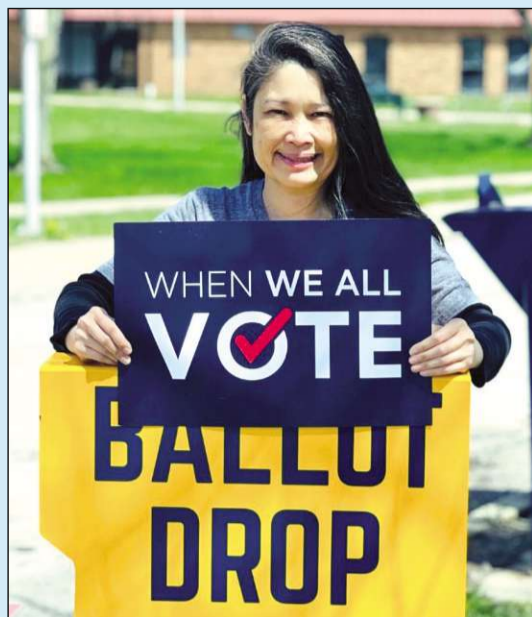
The right to vote means different things to different people. For me, it represents belonging, humility, responsibility and hope.

It took me 13 years to become a citizen and earn the right to vote. Those 13 years taught me what it means to live in a country you deeply care about while having no voice in shaping its future.

Like many immigrants, I worked hard, paid taxes, raised a family and contributed to my community. I did everything in my power to help build a better society, yet for many years, I could not choose the people making decisions that affected my life, my safety, my daughter's education, my city, my state or the country to which I had dedicated so much of my life.

That experience deepened my commitment to voting and civic engagement. When we all vote, we do not vote only for ourselves. We vote for our families, our neighbors and those whose voices are not yet fully represented. We vote for people who contribute every day but are unable to participate in the democratic process.

Years later, I came to understand just how meaningful that first voting experience was for my then-8-year-old daughter. Watching me vote left a lasting impression on her. It helped shape her understanding of civic responsibility and ultimately influenced the career path she chose.



Provided

That day was about more than casting a ballot. It was about showing my daughter that democracy is not something we take for granted. It is something we protect, participate in and pass on to the next generation.

If you turn 18 by Nov. 3, or if you have moved or changed your name, please register to vote or update your registration at [ova.elections.il.gov](http://ova.elections.il.gov).

**'Flags flew proudly from homes, businesses, vehicles and buildings throughout my community'****BECKY PRESTON**Community bank president,  
Bank of Springfield,  
Champaign

Of all the moments in my life when I have been proud to be an American, none stands out more than the days and weeks following



Sept. 11, 2001. Like so many Americans, I was heartbroken by the tragedy and loss of lives. Yet amid the grief, I witnessed our nation come together in a way I had never seen before. People set aside their differences and united in support of our first responders and our country.

One of the strongest memories is seeing American flags everywhere. Flags flew proudly from homes, businesses, vehicles and buildings throughout my community. Stores quickly sold out of American flags because so many people wanted to display their

love of country and a show of solidarity.

I vividly remember attending our fall festival parade in Princeton, Illinois, with my two little boys, who were just babies at the time. As the fire trucks rolled by, they waved their little American flags. Watching them, I felt an overwhelming sense of pride and gratitude and a little bit of sadness. It still makes me emotional when I think about that memory.

More than two decades later, I still remember the sense of unity that followed that tragic event. While the circumstances that brought us together were heart-breaking, the compassion and patriotism shown by everyday Americans made me incredibly proud of our country.

**'Proud to be an American every day that I am blessed enough to wake up'****DALE BOYER**Community bank president,  
Peoples Bank & Trust  
of Tuscola

Honestly, there is not a single event or day that makes me proud to be an American. I am proud to be an American every day that I am blessed enough to wake up.

Patriotism, for me, is not an emotion that is ignited by a single event or holiday. It's something I feel every day.

I am honored to be the son of a veteran who gave 22 years of his life to the service of our nation. Twenty-two years that were marked by sacrifice, extended travel overseas, time away from family and an unwavering commitment to something greater than himself.

I had an uncle who walked through the jungles of Vietnam, carrying memories from that service that he was never comfortable talking about. My grandfather answered the call to serve during World War II. The sacrifices they made for this country through service will always be something I am proud of.

When I look at the red, white and blue, I swell with passion for the country and what it means to be an American. My pride in America is personal, earned through the sacrifices of my family across generations, across wars, across decades of service.

It is a pride that does not waver with politics or headlines, because it is not rooted in events that swell emotion, but in people — the ones who loved this country enough to pick up their rifle and stand for it.

God Bless America!

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AMERICA at 250

**'This family was one of many who sacrificed for our independence'**

**LOTT THOMAS**  
Champaign attorney



My proudest moment as an American was the day I went on active duty in the Air Force in 1956. In return, the Air Force put me through pilot training, followed by many memorable and sometimes challenging experiences that were instrumental in my personal growth and maturity.

I was fortunate there were no conflicts involving our military during my three-year stint. As a friend who served in the Navy and I used to say: "We did our jobs. We kept the peace."

On this 250th anniversary of independence, I find myself reflecting on the life of one of my great-great-great-etc. grandfathers, who was one of the minutemen killed on April 19, 1775, when British troops went from Boston to Lexington and Concord to seize stockpiled weapons of the patriots.

Six months later, his wife died and the children were raised by the community. This family was one of many who sacrificed for our independence.

**'The strongest reminders of what makes America special aren't always found in history books or headline-making events'**

**SETH FLOYD**  
Army veteran and Piatt County circuit clerk

Rather than pointing to one defining moment in my life, I can say without hesitation that I feel proud to be an American over

**'The belief that we all have the ability to contribute to something larger than ourselves'**

**DENISE POINDEXTER**  
HR manager, MH CPA of Champaign



Kristin Darling

When I first read this question, I immediately thought about all the answers I didn't want to give.

I don't have a single political moment or historical event that stands out as the day I felt proudest to be an American. Instead, the moments that resonate most with me are the countless times I've watched people show up for one another.

Through my work and community involvement, I've had the opportunity to mentor young professionals, support organizations that invest in women and girls and work alongside people who generously give their time and talents to make their communities better.

I've seen neighbors rally around families facing hardship, volunteers step up when help was needed and ordinary people quietly create opportunities for others.

Those moments rarely make headlines, but they are the moments that have shaped my view of America.

If I had to choose what makes me proudest to be an American, it is not a single day. It is the belief that we all have the ability to contribute to something larger than ourselves. It is the willingness of people to invest in their communities, support one another and create opportunities for future generations.

For me, America's greatest strength has never been found in a politician, a party or a particular moment in history. It has always been found in its people.



and over again — almost every single day. I've come to realize that the strongest reminders of what makes America special aren't always found in history books or headline-making events, or even in life-changing moments. More often, they're found in the regular actions of everyday people we encounter.

National and international events can certainly influence how we feel about our country. Political disagreements, economic uncertainty and global crises can make it easy to question one's love for America.

Yet whenever I look close to home, I'm reminded that some of the values that inspire pride in

our nation — kindness, generosity, hard work, volunteerism, resilience and a willingness to help our neighbors — are alive and well in communities across America, and not just when a headline event occurs.

It's the neighbor who clears someone else's sidewalk after a snowstorm without being asked.

It's the volunteers who coach youth sports, organize community fundraisers or serve meals at local events.

It's the local business owner who knows customers by name, the farmers helping one another during harvest, the veteran who raises the American flag at dawn even if nobody else will see it, the mail carrier who delivers every last piece of mail whether the day is hot or cold, rainy or snowy, and the people who rally around a family in need with a meal train

or benefit auction.

These moments may seem ordinary, but together they create communities where people care for one another, take ownership in where they live and invest in the wellness of others.

Their examples remind me of Olympic gold medalist and Champaign native Bob Richards, who said, "God must love ordinary people because he made so many of us. Yet, every single day, in every walk of life, ordinary people accomplish extraordinary things."

Those small acts ripple outward, making our country stronger — one person and one community at a time. To me, those ideals are far more powerful in binding Americans together and are what make me most proud to be an American every day.

**'To experience 350,000 people fall silent to hear a single soldier play a trumpet from the flag stand is something that brings goosebumps and tears every year'**

**RUSH RECORD**  
Executive director, Champaign County CASA



There are many things that make me proud to be an American. From visits to historic places and learning more about our history to speaking to veterans and hearing their remarkable stories, there are many reminders of those who gave all and sacrificed for all of us.

I witnessed a soldier burial at Arlington that was impressive and of course, the Changing of The Guard is the epitome of honoring our fallen.

One thing comes to mind, though, that I have experienced for 40-plus years now.

Each May, my family celebrates Memorial Day at the Indianapolis 500. Seeing all those people together is quite a sight and the race is always an event to remember.

Pre-race festivities are always something to see and while some things have changed over the years, the playing of taps has not.

To experience 350,000 people fall silent to hear a single soldier play a trumpet from the flag stand is something that brings goosebumps and tears every year.

Nothing compares to taps. It is always solemn but with all those people standing in absolute silence, it is something to experience.

**Happy 250th Anniversary America!**

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## 'Being American is not just about where you live — it's about how you show up, for yourself and for each other'

**LAURIE BRAUER**  
Champaign County coroner



Running a marathon made me a proud American not because of a finish time or a medal, but because the experience reflected the very best of what this country stands for: perseverance, community and the belief that ordinary people can do extraordinary things.

Training for a marathon was humbling. It demanded discipline, consistency and a willingness to show up on days when my motivation was low and my excuses were plentiful. That commitment mirrors a core American value — the idea that progress is earned through effort. Mile by mile, the work taught me to be responsible for my own goals and to respect the process. There were no shortcuts, only honest labor. That mindset is deeply American.

Race day itself is where that pride truly came alive. The marathon wasn't just a test of individual endurance; it was a collective effort. Volunteers wake up early to staff water stations. Strangers cheered my name from the sidelines and lined the streets with homemade signs and outstretched hands. People of every background — different ages, races, beliefs and abilities — stood together to support one another. In that moment, we were all united, not by politics or ideology, but by shared humanity and encouragement.

Running a marathon also highlights the freedom we often take for granted. The freedom to move, to gather, to challenge ourselves and to pursue goals simply because they matter to us. The ability to train safely in public spaces, to participate in organized events and to celebrate personal

achievement openly is not universal around the world.

Perhaps most importantly, the marathon taught me resilience. There came a point — late in the race, those last few miles — when quitting felt logical and continuing felt impossible. Pushing through that moment built confidence in me that carried far beyond running that first marathon. It reinforces the belief that persistence can move us forward even when the road is hard. Resilience is woven into

the American story, from past generations to the present.

Crossing the finish line did not make me proud because I ran 26.2 miles. It made me proud because the journey reflected values I believe in: hard work, mutual support, freedom and resilience. In that race, surrounded by strangers who felt like neighbors, I was reminded that being American is not just about where you live — it's about how you show up, for yourself and for each other.

## 'My grandfather didn't have to give the ultimate sacrifice, but he understood it was a possibility'

**CHAD HOFFMAN**  
CEO, Habitat for Humanity of Champaign County

The memorable event that makes me proudest to be an American goes back to a school project, when I had to identify a veteran and complete a report on that individual. I picked my grandfather on my mom's side, who served during World War II.

Like most veterans, he rarely talked about his time in the military besides the horrible food. Probably because it was for my school project, he agreed to let me interview him.

It was intriguing to learn about his time in the military. He served in Italy in the ski patrol and helped liberate that country. After a brief return to the U.S., he was redeployed and was on ship to Asia when the war ended.

He talked about becoming an officer and serving in the artillery unit during his time in the service, and he was appreciative of the distance that was between him and the enemy. Some of his friends had a very different experience.

My grandfather acknowledged that they were real heroes and truly sacrificed for our country.

Based on my interview, it was clear that he was proud of his time serving our country, but there were memories and feelings that he didn't want to recall.

He never traveled overseas again, never skied again and never talked about his war experiences after that report.

It is my grandfather's humility, pride and sacrifice that made

me feel patriotic. He left his life and family, including an expectant wife, behind to ensure freedom for others. My grandfather didn't have to give the ultimate sacrifice, but he understood it was a possibility. It's those traits that make me feel patriotic and truly connected to the good in our county.

It's some of those feelings that still reside in me as Habitat for Humanity of Champaign County looks to fully complete their first veteran house in multiple years and has already selected a deserving family. In part, supporting a veteran with a new home is a great way to honor my grandfather, father-in-law, brother-in-law and all the veterans that have served our country.

Giving back to those who have given so much brings the patriotic feelings around my grandfather full circle.

## 'I believe we live in the greatest country in the world'

**CRYSTAL McCULLOUGH**  
Executive and worship pastor, Meadowbrook Community Church



The most memorable moment I can recall is the response to the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks. The attacks were shocking to the nation and

caused a reset within the hearts of millions of Americans.

There was an increase in prayer, church attendance, singing, flag displays and a genuine common love for America.

I was proud to be an American during that time because we truly came together and worked together for the good of our fellow man and country.

I believe we live in the greatest country in the world, and July Fourth is one of my favorite holidays.

God bless America!

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# AMERICA at 250

## 'The people of Iraq are overwhelmingly in support of the United States' efforts'

**PETER BUCKLEY**

Retired FBI special agent and St. Joseph resident

In January of 2005, I volunteered to go to Doha, Qatar, to be the team leader in charge of investigators from the U.S. Department of Justice as part of the Regime Crimes Liaison Office.



The office was assisting the new Iraqi government in gathering evidence to prosecute Saddam Hussein and six of his lieutenants for crimes against humanity. After 100 days, my team was replaced by another team that continued to work for the office.

The following is from the last email I sent to Illinois before I left Qatar:

"Dear family and friends: This is probably my last e-mail to you from Qatar. Thank you all for the many e-mails I have received, as these e-mails kept me sane and helped ease the homesickness I sometimes felt.

"While in Qatar, I enjoyed meeting new people and relished in the fact that many of them were as weird as me. The mission I worked on at the Regime Crimes Liaison Office was very important, but I am ready to come home.

"The Iraqi people went through hell while Saddam was in power, and I now have no doubt we did the right thing by invading Iraq. I have spoken with Tom Noble (another FBI agent), who just arrived from Baghdad. He visited the mass grave sites and has spoken to many Iraqis, and despite what the press may say, the people of Iraq are overwhelmingly in support of the United States' efforts, especially in pursuing trials against the former regime.

"Tom said he saw infants' bodies with bullet holes through their head. He described mass grave sites shaped like a community swimming pool, where women and children were forced to walk down a ramp into the bottom of the pool, where they were killed by shooting. Tom said the men were placed into a similar pit, where they were shot in the legs at first — to prevent them from running away — then were eventually shot and buried. Some of them were buried alive ...

"I saw photos of prisoner cells where children were detained. These cells still had pictures on the walls that the children drew. I saw other cells where adults were kept, and they scrawled their names on the walls because they knew they were going to die and they wanted someone to know that they had been killed.

"I always knew I was lucky to have been born in the United States, but this experience in the Middle East has really enforced my feeling of gratitude. I hope I retain this feeling for some time to come.

"I can't wait to see you all. Hugs and kisses to everyone."

## 'Something special about an immigrant American welcoming new Americans'

**PAM LAU**

Parkland College president

Addressing new citizens at the naturalization ceremony held in Parkland's Harold and Jean Miner Theatre stands out for me. Each time I deliver opening remarks as the college president, my heart wells up with pride and joy.

There is something special about an immigrant American welcoming new Americans into the fold.

One reason the naturalization ceremony stands out is that I get to highlight our shared experience. The journey to citizenship is a long one, requiring some sacrifices and hard decisions, much grit and determination, and many lessons in patience. But there is another reason.

Standing on stage and looking at the new citizens before me, I am reminded of the profound sense of gratitude that I felt some 25 years ago when I took the oath of allegiance, grateful that this great nation was willing to accept me as one of its own and offer me the privileges and opportunities that come with citizenship.

This sense of gratitude and appreciation remains strong with me.

I have personally experienced how the United States, my adopted homeland, provides the opportunity for us to grow, for our aspirations



to take flight, for us to experience success.

I am a living current example of how it is possible in this

country for an immigrant to move from the margins into the mainstream of society, enjoying the full benefits that

come with being an American citizen. This remains a realistic possibility today. I am proud to be an American.



## 'Seeing our nation elect its first African American president was profoundly meaningful to me'

**ANGELA SLATES**

Program manager, Cancer Center at Illinois

One of the moments that made me proudest to be an American was witnessing the election of Barack Obama as president.

Seeing our nation elect its first African American president was profoundly meaningful to me, both personally and historically. It represented the possibility of progress and reinforced the idea that, despite our historical challenges, the United States can continue to evolve and expand opportunities for all citizens.

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## 'Our legal system is the envy of the world'

**RITA GARMAN**

Retired state Supreme Court justice

I have always been proud to be an American. Our legal system is the envy of the world. Due process and the right to trial by jury do not exist in many places in the world. Our Constitution has guided us for the past 250 years, even though society and circumstances have changed and challenged us.

When I served as a judge, I was asked on at least two occasions by the Honorable David Bernthal to speak to the naturalization ceremony in the Central District of Illinois — one at the Carle Forum and the other at the old state capitol in Springfield.

At both events, I spoke about the meaning of citizen versus subject. The audience of immigrants from around the globe had just successfully completed the process of becoming a naturalized citizen. As they stood to take the oath, they were all so proud and excited about their new status.

It was quite an emotional experience to see a room full of our newest fellow Americans smiling and enthusiastically waving American flags and I was so proud to be a part of the journey.

Provided



## 'Serving in the Peace Corps remains the proudest chapter of my American story'

**LYNNE DEARBORN**

Associate director of design, UI School of Art & Design

In my life, nothing has made me prouder to be an American than serving as a U.S. Peace Corps volunteer. That journey, full of anticipation and uncertainty, took me to the island nation of Fiji for a life-changing two-and-a-half years.

While my college friends chose Europe, I sought something deeper: a real challenge, not a comfortable semester abroad. With degrees in building science and architecture, I wanted to use my skills for real impact, learn through full immersion and test myself far from home.

Growing up in the 1960s and '70s, the Peace Corps held a certain mystique, a promise of service and adventure. By my final year of college, I had set my sights on joining. I could not have known then just how deeply this decision would shape my life's goals, professional purpose and appreciation for the freedoms and privileges of U.S. citizenship.

After an 18-month vetting process, I left for Fiji with 35 fellow volunteers. I was eager to share my architectural training while a lecturer at the Fiji Institute of Technology, anticipating how I could serve through teaching.

But my perspective shifted during the intensive three months of pre-service language, culture and teacher training. Living with a family in a rural village, I quickly realized how much I still had to learn. I slept on the floor with everyone else and discovered that the concrete floor, installed with the best intentions through a USAID project, worsened the arthritis of older family members.

I observed how 12 extended family members, spanning four generations, shared a single 12-by-14-foot one-room house, with their traditions shaping how every inch was used. I saw how the lack of opportunities weighed on the young people in such villages, creating a quiet undercurrent of uncertainty and discontent.

All these lessons came before I even began my volunteer assignment, challenging my assumptions and opening my mind.

During my two years teaching at FIT, I was an oddity — a woman teaching primarily men in a male-dominated field, an American who "walked too fast," a foreigner navigating unfamiliar customs that ranged from body language to clothing to basic conversations with colleagues.

Yet, as I settled into my role, I found myself forming unexpected bonds with my students. They told me I was different from their other teachers, that they could tell I cared about both the subject and their growth.

What surprised me most was how much my students taught me. They challenged my assumptions and helped me grow, not just as a teacher but as a person. Watching them juggle obligations and limited resources, I learned how kindness bridges cultural divides. Over time, we built trust through everyday moments.

They showed me true diplomacy happens quietly, in listening and respect. Looking back, I hope I gave as much as I received. I left a piece of myself in Fiji, and I carry the lessons and friendships always. Serving in the Peace Corps remains the proudest chapter of my American story.

## 'Land of the free and the home of the brave'

**STU MEACHAM**

Champaign investment adviser

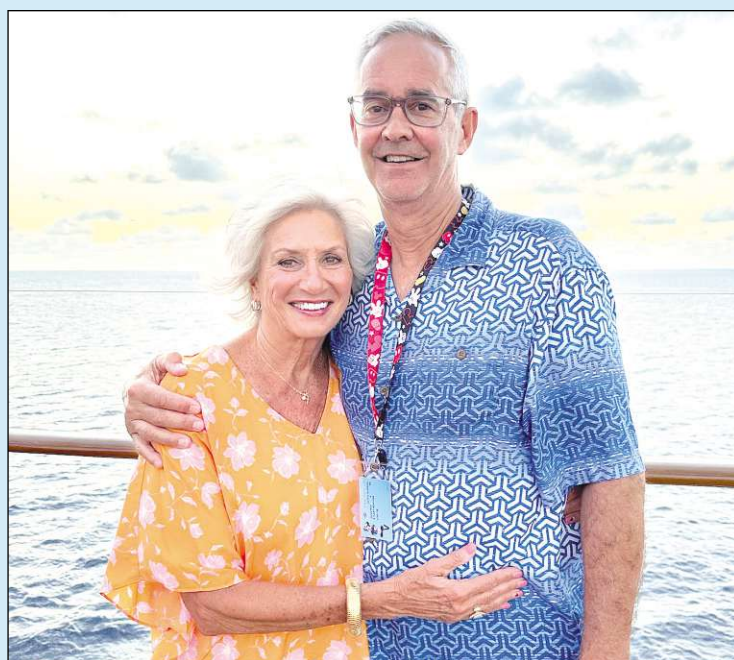
Everything in life needs the support of a strong foundation. Our founding fathers' Declaration of Independence, drafted 250 years ago, started us off well ...

"We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and pursuit of Happiness."

We are fortunate to live in a "land of the free and the home of the brave." Yes, our country is built upon a solid foundation.

When we look around, we can also see that the only way to build a strong home, a strong company or a strong team is by starting with the "right bricks" — the foundation.

Maybe as tricky as anything is building the foundation of a strong marriage. Fortunately, if we realize a "cord of three strands is not easily broken," we can thank our Savior that adding Him to our marriage equation leads to a spiritual foundation. I know it's made a difference in my marriage.



THE MEACHAMS

Provided



Robin Scholz/The News-Gazette

## 'One of America's greatest strengths is its ability to inspire each new generation to dream bigger than the one before it'

**BRIAN BRINK**

Unity schools superintendent

When I think about the moment that made me proudest to be an American, I go back to November 2008 when Barack Obama was elected president.

At the time, I was a physical education teacher at Pontiac Junior High School in Fairview Heights. The student body was fairly evenly split between Black and White students. What I remember most is not the election itself, but walking into school the next day and seeing the excitement on the faces of many of my Black students.

For many of them, it was the first time they had seen someone who looked like

them achieve success on that level. Even years later, I can still remember the energy in the building and the conversations that took place that day.

What made the experience so meaningful for me was the perspective it gave me. As a White person, I had never really thought about how often I saw people who looked like me in positions of leadership, on television, in history books or in advertisements. It was simply something I had always taken for granted. Watching my students react helped me understand something I had never fully appreciated before.

The moment was not about politics for me. It was about possibility. It was about seeing young people realize that opportunities they may have once viewed as out of reach were within reach, after all. Whether they dreamed of becoming teachers, doctors, business leaders or public servants, they could see a new example of what was possible.

Nearly two decades later, I still remember that day. It was a reminder that one of America's greatest strengths is its ability to inspire each new generation to dream bigger than the one before it.



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# HISTORY BUFFS



America's 250th birthday provides a good opportunity to recognize some pivotal moments in East Central Illinois history — events and trends that shaped the communities we call home, and the people behind them. ¶ With that in mind, multimedia reporter **KATHY REISER** asked several history-minded locals to tell us which aspects of local history they think the history books might overlook.

## 'A significant role model ... and a standard for Black excellence'

**BARBARA SUGGS MASON**

Retired school superintendent and educational consultant



Albert R. Lee, shown in 1938, worked in the Office of the President of the University of Illinois from 1895 to 1947.

Suggs Mason chose **Albert R. Lee** as an unsung hero of local history.

Lee was born on a Champaign County farm in 1874 and was a descendant of one of the earliest known African American families who settled in East Central Illinois during Reconstruction; his father had been enslaved.

"Like so many of these early settlers, Lee's family were ordinary men and women who brought with them the values of self-determination, resilience, ingenuity, an understanding of the importance of education for racial and social uplift, and faith that the future promised a better world for themselves and their children," she said.

Lee enrolled at the UI after graduating from Champaign High School in 1893. One



of the few Black students at the time, he left his course of study and in 1895 was hired as a messenger in the Office of the President of the University of Illinois, the second Black employee at the university. He spent five decades in that office, rising to the position of chief clerk before retiring in 1947.

During these years, Lee became known as "the unofficial dean" of Black students at the UI, Suggs Mason said.

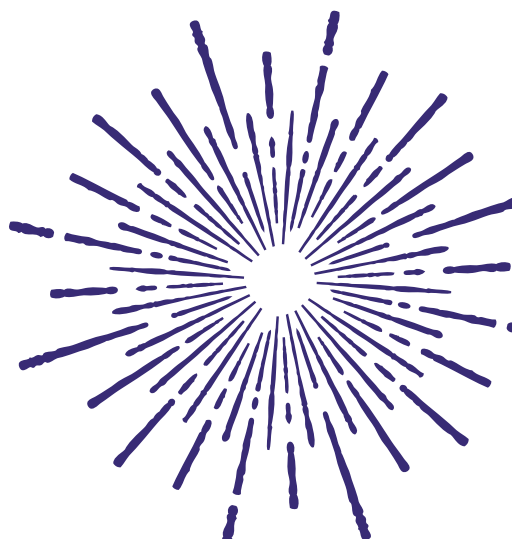
"It was a time of segregation when Black students could attend the university but could not live in student housing or eat in local restaurants," she said. "Lee saw the need to expand his duties beyond his regular clerical work in the office and took it upon himself to become the person Black parents relied on to help find safe and proper housing for their children who were attending the UI."

A highly regarded leader in the broader Black community,

Lee found these places in the homes of local African American citizens. He became an advocate for these students and their go-to person for guidance and advice. Lee looked out for their spiritual needs, too. As a member and leader of Bethel A.M.E. Church, he established the church as a "home away from home" for these young people who may not always have found the larger community welcoming.

"I never met Mr. Lee, but his name was often repeated by my mother and her siblings as a significant role model for them and a standard for Black excellence," Suggs Mason said. "I heard more than one story about the ways in which he advocated for the students, including them, and community members. He left a history of the time he served at the university in the library archives, providing us with a wealth of information."

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## 'F.K. Robeson built one of central Illinois' premier department stores, making downtown Champaign a regional shopping destination for generations'

**HARALD HOLZER**

Champaign city historian

Holzer says three families stand out in his mind as pillars of local history. The county seat of Urbana was established on 43 acres of land donated by **Isaac and Matthew W. Busey** along with **T.R. Weber**. The Busey family's legacy continues to shape Champaign County to this day.

"A second family is the Harris family. **Benjamin Franklin Harris** brought with him from the East many of the county's first modern conveniences, including its first sawmill, mower, reaper, carriage, organ, bricks and cook stove," Holzer said. "He transformed the Champaign Daily Gazette into one of central Illinois' leading newspapers and founded the First National Bank of Champaign under a charter signed by his friend Abraham Lincoln. His contributions touched nearly every aspect of the county's early development.

"Finally, there is the Robeson family. **F.K. Robeson** built one of central Illinois' premier department stores, making downtown Champaign a regional shopping destination for generations. The rivalry between the Robeson and Harris families helped produce competing newspapers — the Champaign Daily News and the Champaign Daily Gazette — as well as competing banks, the Champaign National Bank and the First National Bank of Champaign."

Holzer said their competition spurred innovation, while the Robeson family's philanthropy continues to benefit the community today. The banks and newspapers still exist following economically driven mergers.

He believes the single greatest force shaping Champaign County — a literal sense — was the retreat of the glaciers.

"They left behind the mineral-rich parent material that, together with thousands of years of prairie grasses, produced our remarkable black soil," he said. "Yet fertile land alone was not enough. Farmers transformed the 'wet prairie' by installing miles of drainage tile, making large-scale agriculture possible.

"The arrival of the railroads then connected the county to national markets, accelerating population and economic growth. Without these developments, it is doubtful that Illinois would have selected Champaign County as the home of the Illinois Industrial University, now the University of Illinois. Together, these events laid the foundation for the thriving community we know today."



The News-Gazette

On May 7, 1969, the Committee on Allerton presented almost 78,000 signatures gathered for its 'Save Allerton Park' drive in opposition to the proposed Oakley Reservoir project to William Cellini, left, state director of public works.

## 'Natural areas ... would have been permanently damaged or destroyed if not for the thousands of people who rallied to save them'

**DIANE MARLIN**

Former Urbana mayor



stakeholders focused on public education, political organizing and community advocacy

"In the late 1960s, one of the most significant historical movements in our region was begun to protect rivers from dam and channelization projects," Marlin said. "A coalition of local, state and national conservation groups, farm organizations and other

to build support and pass legislation at the state and federal level.

"Their efforts saved local treasures such as Allerton Park and Retreat Center (Sangamon River), laid the groundwork for Illinois' only National Wild and Scenic River (Middle Fork River), protected drainage on over 100,000 acres of Central Illinois farmland and preserved forest corridors such as Warbler Woods along the Embarras River.

"All of these natural areas and many more would have been permanently damaged or

destroyed if not for the thousands of people who rallied to save them. The lessons learned here in central Illinois were shared with groups across the U.S., contributing to protection of areas like Red River Gorge (Kentucky), Big Pine Creek (Indiana), Little Miami River Watershed (Ohio) and Delaware Water Gap National Recreation Area.

"Notably, today's statewide conservation leaders such as Prairie Rivers Network can trace their roots directly back to the earlier efforts."

## MICHAEL MARKSTAHLER

Champaign renewal developer

Markstahler said **Mark Carley** gets his vote as the most interesting man ever to live in Champaign. Even though Carley died nearly 130 years ago, "I still suspect he owns that title."

Born in New Hampshire in 1799, Carley resolved as a young man to see the world as he earned a living. His thirst for adventure took him to New Brunswick, Cape Hatteras, New Orleans, Cuba, Oregon and California gold-rush country. He worked as a sailor, entrepreneur, millwright, builder and judge of the miners' court before he married and settled down as an Ohio farmer.

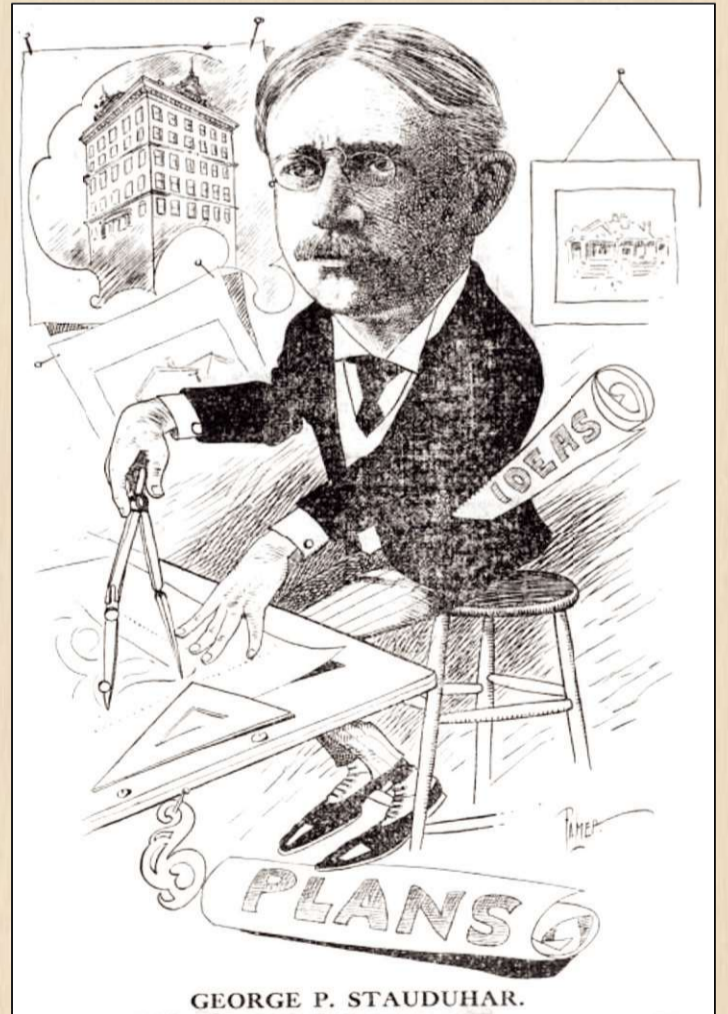
The Carleys came to Illinois in 1853, shortly before the Illinois Central Railroad came through Champaign County. Carley was a contemporary of **Curtis F. Columbia** and **J.P. White**, and all three had a knack for making deals with the Illinois Central and developing land near the railroad. From time to time, they may have been privy to some inside information that made those deals especially lucrative.

Carley erected the first grain warehouse in Champaign, built a brick agricultural warehouse on Main Street and a brick livery stable on Market Street. Active in politics, he was the first township supervisor of West Urbana (now Champaign). He even owned the first piano in town.

Carley's granddaughter wrote "when Lincoln was ever in Champaign County, my grandfather would ask him to dinner. Lincoln was a most unusual and brilliant man in the opinion of my grandfather. He used to tell us that he could never say enough about Mr. Lincoln. I recall that my grandfather gave his legal business to Lincoln because he thought he had such skill as a lawyer. Grandfather said that you didn't need to tell Lincoln about anyone, for he had a way of knowing a person's character almost at once."



MARK CARLEY



GEORGE P. STAUDUHAR.

Courtesy Rock Island Argus

## BILL MAHER

Retired UI archivist



While Champaign County history books are loaded with references to local architects **Joseph Royer** and **Nathan Ricker**, Maher said **George P. Stauduhar** also deserves recognition for his role in shaping the built environment of the places many of us call home.

"Born in Decatur and raised in Mahomet, he graduated in 1889 from the University of Illinois' School of Architecture, the first public school of architecture in the country, then went on to become a prolific architect," Maher said. "Why should we remember him? Well, if you or your parents, grandparents, great-grandparents or even great-great-grandparents ever attended St. Patrick Church in Urbana, St. Malachy Church in Rantoul, St. Boniface Church near Seymour, St. Joseph Church in Ivesdale, Sacred Heart in Farmer City, or St. Lawrence Church in Penfield, you have George Stauduhar to thank for their existence.

"He was the one who designed and built them all."

In fact, between 1890 and 1928, he designed and built more than 200 churches throughout Illinois, Iowa, Kansas, Nebraska and as far away as North Dakota. He built dozens of hospitals, banks and commercial buildings throughout the Midwest, as well.

"In other words, he touched thousands upon thousands of Midwestern lives, particularly here in East Central Illinois," Maher said. "Not bad for a child raised in Champaign County!"



Provided

An older version of the Champaign County Courthouse in use from 1861 to 1901 in downtown Urbana donated by Isaac and Matthew W. Busey and T.R. Weber.

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# AMERICA at 250



Robin Scholz photos/The News-Gazette

**LEFT:** Barbara Linder, founder of the C-U One-to-One mentoring program, near her office at Urbana Middle School in 2016, just before she retired from that job after 22 years. **RIGHT:** Barbara Gillespie is shown in 2023 next to the Abraham Lincoln statue outside the University of Illinois Alice Campbell Alumni Center on campus in Urbana.



AP file photo

Vashti McCollum holds a copy of The News-Gazette announcing the Supreme Court's 1948 ruling in her favor in her case against the Champaign school board over religious classes being taught in public schools.

## 'She stood her ground through great pressure and condemnation as a young mother while raising three boys and successfully keeping the family intact to this very day'

**BARBARA WYSOCKI**

Former Champaign County Board chair and retired history teacher



Wysocki cited "Ellen McDowell, who spent a great part of her life feeding the hungry in Champaign-Urbana. Through that daily activity, she led the transition of the Catholic Worker House in Urbana into the Daily Bread (Soup Kitchen) in Champaign and, along the way, created a more sustainable organization, building and encouraging community between and among the volunteer help, and between volunteers and those in need.

In addition, "I think Vashti McCollum deserves recognition for her efforts to defend a democracy that features the principle of 'separation of church and state,'" Wysocki said. "She stood her ground through great pressure and condemnation as a young mother while raising three boys and successfully keeping the family intact to this very day."

A Champaign resident, McCollum was the plaintiff in the landmark 1948 U.S. Supreme Court case McCollum v. Board of Education, which struck down religious education in public schools.



ELLEN McDOWELL

### 'Well past 90, she continues to mentor and lead by example'

**PHYLLIS WINTERS-WILLIAMS**

Retired University of Illinois building-service worker

Winters-Williams said Barbara Linder started the C-U One-to-One mentoring program 31 years ago "and, until the last couple of years, has trained every mentor in the twin cities. Students who are mentored, even one hour per week, are more likely to stay in school, graduate and succeed in life. All of that for one hour! That is real community building!



"Barb trained us in starting conversations, building rapport, and remains available to help as mentors and mentees navigate growing older and growing up. Through the years, mentees get taller and mentors get a little older.

"Barbara Gillespie is the C-U One-to-One mentor I hope to be when I grow up!" Williams said. "Small in stature and mighty in presence, I have witnessed her greeting most every child in the Dr. Preston Williams (Elementary) lunchroom and seen the effect of her warm greeting and gentle shoulder pat or a smile can have on children who desperately want to be seen, all while on her way to visit with her own mentee. Well past 90, she continues to mentor and lead by example."



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Tony Wesselman, Agent

# No, Freedom Isn't Free.

We salute those who serve.

## FREEDOM IS NOT FREE

by Kelly Strong

I watched the flag pass by one day,  
It fluttered in the breeze;  
A young Marine saluted it,  
And then he stood at ease.

I looked at him in uniform,  
So young, so tall, so proud;  
With hair cut square and eyes alert,  
He'd stand out in any crowd.

I thought... how many men like him  
Had fallen through the years?  
How many died on foreign soil?  
How many mothers' tears?

How many pilots' planes shot down  
How many died at sea  
How many foxholes were soldiers' graves  
No, Freedom is not Free.

I heard the sound of Taps one night,  
When everything was still;  
I listened to the bugler play,  
And felt a sudden chill;

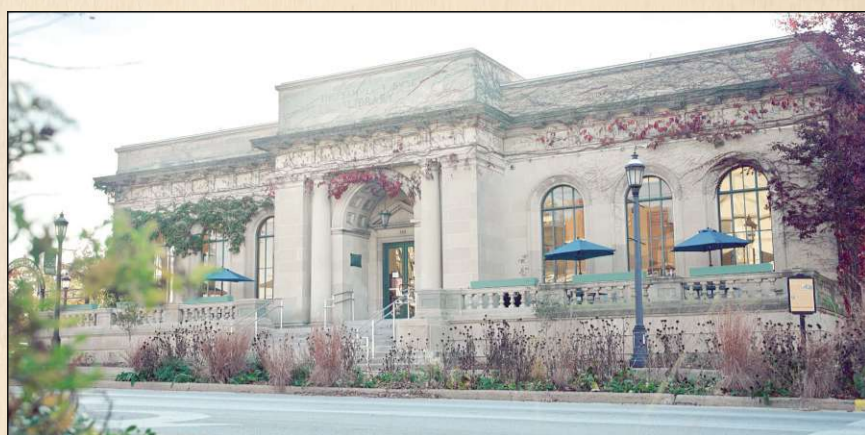
I wondered just how many times  
That Taps had meant "Amen"  
When a flag had draped a coffin  
Of a brother or a friend;

I thought of all the children,  
Of the mothers and the wives,  
Of fathers, sons and husbands,  
With interrupted lives.

I thought about a graveyard  
At the bottom of the sea,  
Of unmarked graves in Arlington,  
No, Freedom is not Free!

© Copyright 1981 by Kelly Strong

# AMERICA at 250



Provided

The founding of the Urbana Free Library in 1874 gets Lloyd Baker's vote for an event that has shaped the past, present and future of C-U.

## SOCIAL NETWORKING

In addition to reaching out directly to a few dozen community leaders, we invited members of the 'Champaign Urbana History' group on Facebook to recognize people and events that shaped their hometowns and the rest of East Central Illinois:

→ **Rachel Vosgrove:** **TIMOTHY NUGENT's** "advocacy for disabled student athletes paved the way for C-U being one of the most accessible communities I've had the privilege of calling home. His work helped create Disability Resources and Educational Services and equal access for education in our community. I personally would not live here without his contributions to C-U and the disabled community overall."



NUGENT

→ **Lloyd Baker:** 'How about the **founding of the Urbana Free Library?** To clarify, in 1874, a non-subscription library was a radical idea, and I'd argue that it has had a permanent and ongoing positive effect on (the) community ever since.'

→ **Bruce Zimmerman:** Without the **Land Grant Act of 1862**, establishing colleges that initially focused on agriculture and engineering, "C-U would not be what it is today. Perhaps as much as half of what we think of as C-U would not be here. While ag, banking, county government, etc., all would still be here, much of the attraction and growth of the area has been accelerated by the University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign."

→ **Joe Williams:** "The **founding of Parkland College** in 1966 and its continued growth; affordable education and job skills plus opportunities for lifelong learning. (And) the opening of the **Max Abramovitz**-designed Krannert Center for the Performing Arts, 1969. We can't imagine our lives without the artists we have been privileged to see. When they say 'come as you are, leave different,' they mean it."

→ **John Turing:** "The collaboration between the cities, Realtors and other public and private organizations to **institute and enforce racial segregation** both legally and extra-legally to protect the White-supremacist 'character' of certain neighborhoods during, and often in response to, the Great Migration. The scars of this process, and the generations of backlash to the Civil Rights movement that came afterward, are extremely apparent on our maps in disparities in almost every local institution ... from housing to health outcomes to education and criminal justice."

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# AMERICA at 250



NANCY ABELMANN

## 'They were amazing scholars, collaborators, mentors and community builders'

ELLEN SWAIN

UI student life and culture archivist

Swain mentioned UI anthropologist **Nancy Abelmann** (1959-2016) and historian **Kathy Oberdeck** (1958-2022), who "built community through the classroom."

"Nancy co-founded the Ethnography of University, a multidisciplinary initiative (2002-2016) that empowered

students to study the university through an ethnographic lens, enabling them to see themselves as part of UI's story," she said. "This original student research — on topics such as 'Asian American registered student organizations on campus,' 'technology's role on changing campus life,' 'racial climate and spatial segregation,' or 'why students bleed orange and blue' — is available in the UI Library's IDEALS repository.

"Kathy connected UI students and faculty; campus and community archivists and librarians; and the CU community through establishment of a Public History Network; History Harvest courses (with the community), research and support of the Fifth and Hill neighborhood, and Hidden Histories tours, designed and conducted by students and community members, highlighting student and community activism. They were amazing scholars, collaborators, mentors and community builders and are sorely missed."



KATHRYN OBERDECK



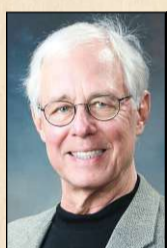
News-Gazette file photo

The Boneyard Creek flows through the recently completed Second Street Detention Basin in June 2011 north of Scott Park in Campustown.

## 'If it hadn't been for Dannel McCollum, we might still be suffering those catastrophic floods'

KIP POPE

Businessman and attorney



Pope said it's difficult now to imagine the severe flooding that used to take place nearly every year during and following rainstorms in parts of Champaign.

"As the community expanded, by 1915, the Boneyard Creek could no longer accept the stormwater runoff, and for decades, Green Street in Campustown, the curve on South Neil Street — 'Lake Neil,' as we called it — and all the railroad underpasses would be under several feet of water, blocking traffic and flooding businesses and homes," he said. "For decades, progress was stalled by fragmented

government units, failed bond issues and political divisiveness.

"If it hadn't been for **Dannel McCollum**, we might still be suffering those catastrophic floods. When he became the mayor of Champaign in 1987, one of his top priorities — maybe his top priority — was to end the flooding. He worked relentlessly for years as the driving force behind getting the city, park district, other government units, engineers, businesses and citizens to cooperate, design and invest in infrastructure that resulted in the huge detention basin northwest of Scott Park and nearly 2 miles of underground 11-foot-diameter pipes that absorb and control the former flooding.

"McCollum, who was also Champaign's unofficial historian for many years and has published prodigiously about the history of our area, deserves great credit and our gratitude for this turning point in Champaign's history."



DANNEL MCCOLLUM



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# 250

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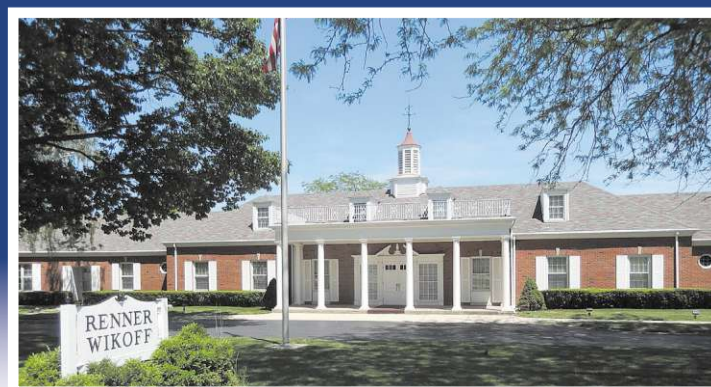
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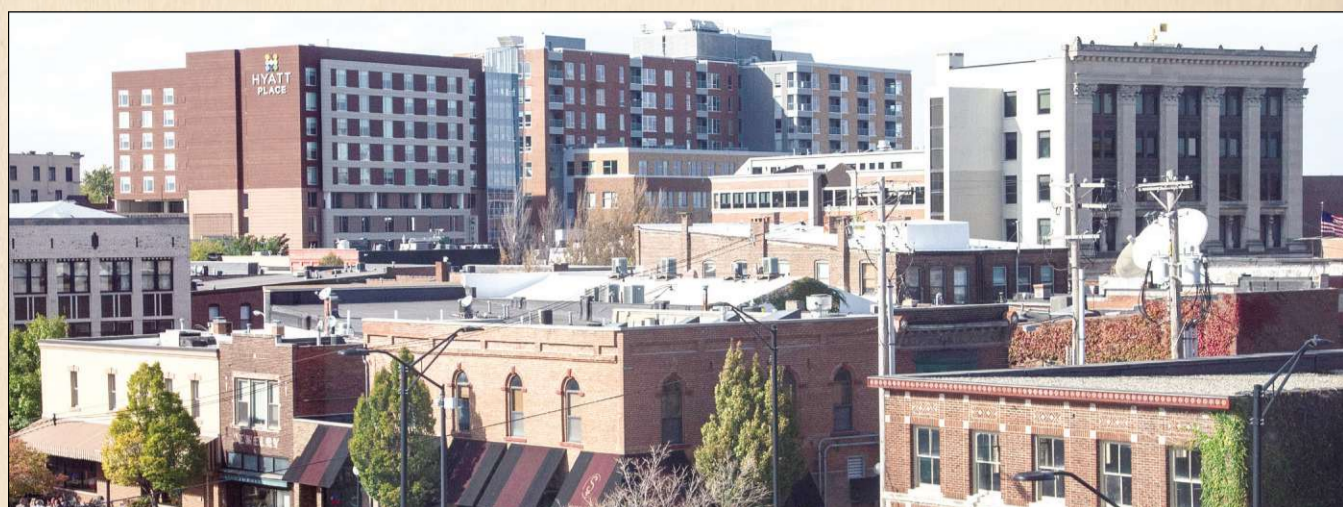
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ESTABLISHED IN 1875

AMERICA at 250



News-Gazette file photo

The skyline of downtown Champaign is shown in 2015 from the Illinois Terminal Building. Many of the buildings are owned by retired Christie Clinic Dr. William Youngerman and his family.

**'There is endless strength in collaboration and cooperation'**

**ALAN NUDO**

Realtor and developer, former Champaign County Board member



Nudo recalled that in the mid-1970s, the downtown area was vibrant with strong locally owned retail stores.

"Robeson's Department Store, Joseph Kuhn's Men's Store, Reed Jewelers, J.C.

Penney, Spritz Jewelers, Noel Fashions, along with many other fine small retailers like a drugstore, a record shop, a sporting goods store, restaurants, and, yes, even five movie theaters for a time," he said.

The next 10 years saw the move of retailers to malls in Champaign and Urbana. This shift meant not only the loss of anchor retailers, but less foot traffic to support all the other businesses. A pedestrian mall that was meant to revitalize the downtown area soon had quite the opposite effect.

When the downtown Champaign mall canopy was removed and the



**KYLE ROBESON**



**DR. WILLIAM YOUNGERMAN**

streets reopened, "many of the historic buildings and spaces were empty, and in need of restoration and rebirth to make the downtown attractive for the businesses and the public," Nudo said, and **Kyle Robeson** and **Dr. William Youngerman** "used their resources, grit and determination to take on many projects for the betterment of the community."

Robeson's Department Store anchored downtown until 1990. With two other partners, Robeson planned

and built the Robeson Meadows and Robeson Meadows West subdivisions, as well as the Village at the Crossing shopping center. He contributed to area parks and schools, as well.

Youngerman, "whose passion and determination to see the historic properties saved and renovated for new uses, began a revival in downtown Champaign," Nudo said. "His ongoing restoration of the many buildings has single-handedly led to a renaissance of eclectic businesses like Fire Doll, Mad Goat Coffee, Greener Goods, Ratio Architecture, Barrelhouse, Jupiter's, CU Venue Event Center, Maize, Black Dog, Kessler Optical, Needful Things, and Pour Bros. thriving in those properties. He is by far the leading developer in downtown Champaign, and his multi-million-dollar renovation of the Joseph Kuhn building is just getting started!

"None of these things happen because of one man or woman, or one idea. There is endless strength in collaboration and cooperation," Nudo said.



Luke Taylor/The News-Gazette

'I promise to serve with humility, respect and a strong commitment to this community,' Joan Walls said after the Champaign City Council voted unanimously to approve her as the next city manager on Dec. 3, 2024.

**'The quiet, loyal, trustworthy and visionary force behind the scenes'**

**TRACY PARSONS**

Community relations manager, city of Champaign

Parsons said current City Manager **Joan Walls** arrived in Champaign in the late 1990s to accept the challenging position of public information officer for the Champaign Police Department. In the late '90s, Parsons said there wasn't a more difficult job than being on the front line navigating police-community relations, and Walls was the perfect person to build relations with/within law enforcement and multiple complex communities.

"I remember distinctly, the great John Lee Johnson saying to me, 'Joan is special,'" he said. "Joan then moved to city of Champaign administration under the leadership of Steve Carter and Dorothy David. In her roles, she was the quiet, loyal, trustworthy and visionary force behind the scenes that has led this city to years of excellence fiscally, economically and socially.

"In December of 2024, she became the first African American city manager. She is doing an unbelievable job leading this \$350 million organization. Daily, Joan is providing positive direction, guidance and requiring accountability for this community while addressing each social, educational and economic issue."



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**2026**

**HAPPY FOURTH OF JULY  
250 YEARS**

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For more than 75 years, The Champaign County Freedom Celebration has been the heartbeat of Independence Day in East Central Illinois.

**Join us to celebrate a full day of Red, White and Blue on July 4, 2026**

- ★ **8:30 AM** Youth Run
- ★ **9:05 AM** 5K Run/Walk
- ★ **11:05 AM** Parade
- ★ **6:00 PM** Evening Entertainment: Featuring Captain Rat and the Blind Rivets on stage located along Kirby Avenue between First and Oak Streets. Parking available in the State Farm Center SE parking lot, the Activities and Recreation Center (ARC) parking lots and around Research Park.
- Also, bounce house/inflatables, face painting, sensory museum, food vendors and more!*
- ★ **9:00 PM** Announcements and presentations: Singing of our National Anthem, invocation and the retiring of our nation's flag
- ★ **9:15 PM (Dusk)** Fireworks Spectacular: Launch from lot E-14 west of State Farm Center

*This event is supported entirely by donations from local businesses and members of the community like you!*

*Come out and enjoy a wonderful day!*

**Learn more at <https://july4th.net>**

**HAPPY  
250<sup>th</sup> AMERICA**



# Champaign County Fair

**July 25-August 1, 2026**  
**Urbana, Illinois**

**Fair food, livestock shows, grandstand events, local talent, family fun, and fair week memories made right here in Champaign County.**

**Saturday, July 25 • Military Day**

10:00 am – Judging for Kesler Hall Exhibits  
 10:00 am – Gates Open  
 1:00 pm – Carnival Opens  
 5:00 pm – Demolition Derby

**Sunday, July 26 • Western Day**

10:00 am – Gates Open  
 9:00 am – Open Horse Show  
 12:00 pm – Carnival Opens  
 12:00 pm-5:00 pm – \$30 Unlimited Ride Bracelet  
 4:00 pm – Draft Horse Show

**Monday, July 27 • Kids Day**

8:00 am – Open Swine Show  
 8:30 am – Open Dairy & Sheep Shows  
 10:00 am – Gates Open  
 10:00am-12:00pm – Pre-School Rides in Kiddie Land  
 5:00 pm – Carnival Opens  
 7:00 pm - Queen & Little Miss Pageant

**Tuesday, July 28 • Senior Citizen Day**

8:30 am – Open Beef Show  
 10:00 am – Gates Open  
 10:00 am-2:00pm Activities for Seniors  
 1:30 pm – Junior Dairy Show  
 5:00 pm – Carnival Opens  
 5:00 pm-10:30 pm – \$30 Unlimited Ride Bracelet  
 5:00 pm – Harness Racing

**Wednesday, July 29 • Livestock Day**

8:00 am – Junior Swine Show  
 8:30 am – Junior Beef & Sheep Shows  
 10:00 am – Gates Open  
 5:00 pm – Carnival Opens  
 7:00 pm- Monster Trucks

**Thursday, July 30 • 4H Day**

8:15 am – 4-H Livestock Shows  
 10:00 am – Gates Open  
 5:00 pm – Carnival Opens  
 7:00 pm - Rodeo

**Friday, July 31**

10:00 am – Gates Open  
 5:00 pm – Carnival Opens  
 7:00 pm - Motocross

**Saturday, Aug 1 • First Responder Day**

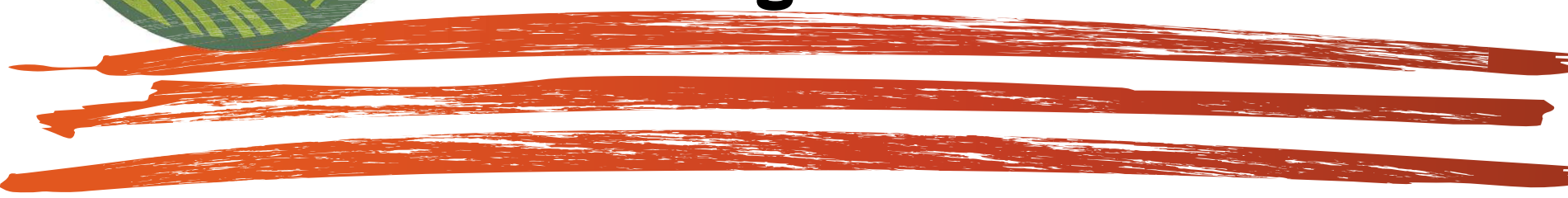
10:00 am – Gates Open  
 12:00 pm – IPA Tractor Pull  
 12:00 pm – Carnival Opens  
 12:00 pm-5:00 pm – \$30 Unlimited Ride Bracelet  
 3:00pm – Jaxson Dillon-Fish, Beer Pavilion  
 6:00 pm – ITPA Tractor & Semi-Truck Pull



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 Mansfield Pesotum Savoy Urbana  
 Melvin Philo Saybrook Villa Grove  
 Milford Potomac Seymour Watseka  
 Monticello Rankin Sibley Weldon  
 Muncie Rantoul Sidell Westville  
 Newman Ridge Farm Sidney White Heath

**OUR COMMUNITIES**  
*the beautiful*

As we the people get ready to mark 250 years of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, here's some slices of life from a few of the 'Great 88' towns in our coverage area, as shown above and every day in the 'Our Communities' section. Head to [news-gazette.com](http://news-gazette.com) to see the full gallery with one photo from each.

**ARTHUR**



Provided by Craig Pessman

The Rural Patriot is a popular part of Arthur's Fourth of July fireworks show. The 2024 version is shown above.

**ARCOLA**



Holly Hart/The News-Gazette

The World Famous Lawn Rangers delight the crowd at the Broom Corn Festival Parade on Sept. 9, 2018, in downtown Arcola.

**LUDLOW**



News-Gazette file photo

World War I veterans parade through downtown Ludlow in 1919.

**INDIANOLA**



News-Gazette file photo

Patriot Guard Rider John Pigg stands near the veterans memorial marker at Woodlawn Cemetery in May 2018 near Indianola.

**CHAMPAIGN**



Provide dby Sam Logan

Fireworks explode over State Farm Center during the finale of the 2015 Champaign County Freedom Celebration show in Champaign.

**FAIRMOUNT**



Provided

Former Homer Mayor Ray Cunningham's September 2017 photo of a sunrise aligned with railroad tracks near Fairmount — an event he plans for, as the alignment only happens twice a year — went viral online.

**GEORGETOWN**



Robin Scholz/The News-Gazette

Roy Pintar of Georgetown shares a laugh with Miss Georgetown Fair Queen second runner-up Bryn Wyant, 17, of Allerton at the Golden Wedding Day event at the 2022 Georgetown Fair.



# Celebrate the 250<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the USA



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