

Sketch of Athens

From the *Illustrated Atlas Map of Menard County, Illinois*, (Edwardsville, Ill: W.R. Brink & Co., 1874). Newberry Library call number: +F896565.

Athens (next to extinct Salem), the oldest town of Menard, is located in the southeastern part of the County, and was laid out by Harry Riggins and Abner Hall, on the 7th of September, 1831. The location is an eligible one, the country adjacent being finely adapted to agricultural and horticultural pursuits. Dense forests, comprising as fine oak timber as can be found in any section of Illinois, adjoin the place, and coal of a superior quality abounds in almost inexhaustible quantities at a depth of less than one hundred feet beneath the surface upon which the town is founded. At the time Athens was laid out, John Overstreet was engaged upon the town site in merchandising, and in connection therewith running a small band-mill – the latter then standing between what is now Joel Hall's drug store and the hotel. Jonathan Dunn came next, and for a short time was engaged in the mercantile business. In the spring of 1832 Harry Riggins and A. A. Rankin opened a store which was continued by them some two years, when they sold their stock to Martin M. Morgan. During the year 1833, James D. Allen and Simeon Clark also became merchants of the place, as did Abner and Thomas Tabor and William Brown followed in this business. Charles P. Smith started the first blacksmith shop in 1832. Thomas Tabor and William Brown followed in this business. About the year 1832 or 1833 Colonel Matthew Rogers became a citizen of the town, and made the first permanent improvements – the building now occupied by L. Salzenstein as a store-house being one of the results of his enterprise. Colonel R. became at once identified with the horticultural interests of his section of the State, and established the first nursery of the County, near Athens – many of the present orchards of the County having been reared from nursery stock procured of Colonel Rogers. Peter Graham, Ward Clark, and J. B. Clark were the first carpenters of Athens. The first steam grist-mill was built by Jonathan Dunn

in 1832, and was by him operated a year or two, when the property was purchased by Strawbridge & Croft. The latter attached a distillery to the mill, and ran the two conjointly for several years. We neglected to mention, in its proper place, that Sebastian Stone, in 1836, became a partner with James D. Allen in merchandising, and that Lee, Eaty, and Freeman, were early physicians. The first public school was taught by Rev. Carman Clark in a diminutive farm-house which formerly stood on the site of Charles Salzenstein's store. The Athens district was recently consolidated with an adjoining district, and at this writing (July, 1874) the trustees are engaged in building a large and imposing structure for school purposes, the estimated cost of which is between six thousand and seven thousand dollars. There is also a fine grist-mill in operation, operated by a Mr. Barfield, one of the proprietors. The moral status of the place is not surpassed by any of her sister towns; as the church and its handmaid, the school-house, were almost born with the hamlet, and have ever kept even pace with the more important interests of the town. The Methodists were the pioneer organization, having erected the first church building as early as 1835. This society is now and has ever been large and prosperous. The first organization of the society was perfected by Rev. Asahel E. Phelps, with seventy members. The present pastor is Rev. E. McElfresh. The Christian church was built about the year 1851, and has a large membership. The present pastors of this society are Revs. John Lemon and Claiborne Hall, who hold services alternately. The population of Athens numbers between 500 and 600 souls.