

The O'Neill Family and Hardware Store

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The O'Neills and their family business have been at the center of Lake Forest life for almost as long as the community has existed. O'Neill's Hardware occupied a prominent location in downtown Lake Forest for more than a century, and the family has lived here continuously throughout that time.

Joseph H. O'Neill was born in Ireland in 1836, and was living in America with his brother William by the time he was a teenager. After several years in New York, the brothers moved to Lake Forest, and in 1868 started a tinsmith business. Shortly thereafter, Joseph opened O'Neill's Hardware, leaving William in charge of the tinsmith store. Within a year, Joseph's booming business necessitated a move for the hardware store from the original property between Illinois Road and Vine Avenue to a larger building, which was located where the Market Square fountain is today.

Catastrophe struck in 1882, when a fire destroyed much of Western Avenue, including the O'Neill hardware store. Joseph took the opportunity to build an even bigger building than before—and this time made of brick. It was the first brick building in Lake Forest, and was large enough to incorporate his brother's tinsmith business as well. In addition to serving the Lake Forest community, the O'Neills supplied all of the handmade tin ware for the 1893 Columbian Exposition in Chicago.

After Joseph H. O'Neill's death in 1894, his sons William J. and Joseph W. O'Neill carried on the family business, although in different ways. William continued the tinsmith business, and was the first volunteer fire chief of Lake Forest. He was succeeded in that post by his son William Jr.

Joseph W. O'Neill took over the running of their father's hardware store. In 1916 construction began on Market Square, and the store was relocated further north on Western Avenue, to what is now The Lantern. In addition to running the hardware store, Joseph W. O'Neill developed real estate on North Oakwood Avenue and built two houses near Gorton School.

In the years following Joseph W. O'Neill's death in 1918, two more fires struck the store, first in 1921 and again in 1946. After the second fire, O'Neill's Hardware was relocated just around the corner to 265 Westminster, where it also housed the popular Deluxe movie theater.

At this time the store was overseen by Joseph W. O'Neill's sons Edward and Joseph (called Joseph Sr.), who both continued in the hardware retail business. Edward, born in 1912, ran the family hardware store with Joseph before serving in the Army in World War II. After his return, he and Joseph parted ways, and Edward opened his own store in Highland Park, which was to become Ace Hardware.

His brother Joseph, born in 1910, was an active Lake Forest resident throughout his life. In addition to taking over the running of the hardware store in 1932, he helped fledging local businesses get off the ground and raised funds for Lake Forest's centennial celebration. He eventually made O'Neill's Hardware part of the Cotter Company, which later became True Value. Joseph Sr. had three children: Susan Jane, David, and Joseph Jr.

In 1977 David opened a new business, David O'Neill, Inc., a flower and antique shop located at 204 Wisconsin Avenue. His brother Joseph O'Neill Jr. took over the hardware store from their father, and ran it until 1985. It was later sold to an outside party, although it kept the name O'Neill's Hardware. The business was finally closed in 1997 and the building demolished. The site is now a parking lot.