

History of Cairo

Cairo is a city in Alexander County, Illinois in the United States. The population was 3,632 at the 2000 census. It is the county seat of Alexander County. Cairo is located at the confluence of the Mississippi River and the Ohio River and is the southernmost town in the state of Illinois. Cairo is one of the few towns in Illinois protected by a levee. The rivers converge at what is the southernmost point in Illinois at Fort Defiance State Park, an American Civil War fort that was commanded by General Ulysses S. Grant

History

Cairo was founded in 1837 by the Cairo City and Canal Company, after an earlier effort (1818) had failed, and incorporated as a city in 1858. For fifteen years the town grew slowly, but the sale of lots, which commenced in 1853, and the completion of the Illinois Central Railroad attracted settlers, with the result that by 1860 the population exceeded 2,000. It was an important steamboat port in the nineteenth century; Cairo even had its own Customs House, which has since been converted into a museum. This important structure was designed by Alfred B. Mullet, the U.S. Supervising Architect during Reconstruction, and is one of only seven of his structures remaining. During the American Civil War, Cairo was of great strategic importance and for several months both Grant and Foote had headquarters there.

In 1967, the hanging of a local soldier, Robert Hunt, in a Cairo police station, escalated the violence in this once quiet town. This violence prompted the Illinois National Guard to be called in to restore order. A letter written by Preston Ewing, Jr., Cairo's NAACP president, to Adlai Stevenson, the state treasurer, reported that Cairo banks would not hire blacks. Stevenson told the banks they must hire blacks or the state would remove its money from them.

In 1968, the Burkhardt Factory, Cairo's largest industry, practiced racial discrimination. Also, little league baseball was canceled to keep black children from playing. To further segregate white and black students, a private all-white school was started. Throughout 1969, black citizens could not gather at sports activities, in local parks, or form marches without being threatened by local police or the White Hat vigilante group. This group was organized by Alexander Peyton Berbling. To counteract the White Hats, the United Front of Cairo, a coalition of black organizations was formed. It started to boycott white businesses. In April 1969, Lieutenant Governor Paul Simon and a special committee appointed by the Illinois House of Representatives began to investigate the events occurring in Cairo. The Illinois General Assembly ordered the White Hats to disband and for the enforcement of civil rights laws and racial integration of city and county departments.

Even though the state government became involved, white residents continued to hold mass meetings in public parks and blacks held civil rights rallies in churches. Three local newspapers, the Cairo Evening Citizen, the Southern Illinoisan, and the East St. Louis Monitor helped influence how people looked at the events that occurred. The information portrayed either a pro-white or pro-black newspaper perspective. A group of United Front members went to the state capital on July 7, 1969, to ask the governor for help with the segregation and inequality that persisted in Cairo. However, they were refused admittance to Governor Ogilvie's office and were arrested by state police.

In September 1969, the mayor of Cairo issued a statement prohibiting the gathering of two or more people, all marches, and picketing. In turn, a federal court ruled this proclamation unconstitutional. Throughout October 1969, violence against black protesters continued. It appeared that federal and state involvement was ineffective in controlling the continued segregation and inequality of Cairo's, as well as other Illinois community's black citizens.

Then, Cairo was the site of an intense civil rights struggle. The violence resulted in the National Guard being called in again to restore order. White-owned businesses were boycotted, with some being burned and destroyed, during protests, led by the United Front Civil Rights Organization with ties to the Black Panther Organization. Because of these events, Cairo has not been successful in rebuilding its town as most residents fled the area during this time, never to return.

Cairo has not had a working government since the fateful time during the late 1960's. There have been many attempts to revive Cairo, but to date, none have been successful. Most city leaders are at odds with one another, and cannot agree on what needs to be done. Some city leaders have been caught in scandals or sting operations.

Cairo today faces many significant socio-economic challenges, including poverty, education, and employment. There is now a community clinic offering medical and dental care, and also several mental health services. Much of Cairo's turbulent history was chronicled on a music CD called Greetings From Cairo, Illinois released in 2005.