



JULY 2025

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CONTACT:

RoxAnn Raisner, Director

P.O. Box 754

Edwardsville, IL 62025

618-692-1818

stephensonhouse1820@yahoo.com

www.stephensonhouse.org

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A Newsletter for the volunteers & friends of the Stephenson House



Fireworks, Oratory, and Patriotism: Celebrating the Fourth of July in 1820s America

By A Lady

When Americans gathered to celebrate Independence Day in the 1820s, the nation was still young—barely into its fifth decade. Yet by this time, the Fourth of July had already taken on the trappings of a sacred civic holiday, rich with ritual and symbolism. From booming cannon salutes at dawn to torchlit processions at night, the holiday served as both celebration and reaffirmation of the American experiment in democracy.

A Day of Civic Ritual and Popular Festivity

Throughout the 1820s, towns and cities across the United States marked the Fourth of July with a mixture of solemn ceremony and joyful revelry. According to *The New-York Evening Post* (July 5, 1824), festivities typically began at sunrise with the firing of artillery—"a federal salute" of thirteen guns—followed by the ringing of church bells. In many communities, public readings of the Declaration of Independence were central to the morning's events. These readings were often accompanied by patriotic speeches or sermons that reaffirmed the ideals of liberty, republican virtue, and national unity.



Parades were another common feature, often organized by local militias, civic societies, and veterans of the Revolutionary War. Participants marched behind banners and flags, accompanied by fife and drum corps. In urban areas, tradesmen and apprentices might parade under the colors of their guilds, showcasing both pride in their labor and loyalty to the republic. Children were sometimes involved too, dressed in white or carrying miniature flags.

As the day progressed, communal meals, toasts, and fireworks followed. Towns might sponsor barbecues or picnics open to the public. In Philadelphia and Boston, the evening sky often glittered with firework displays, even in the early dec-

(Celebration, Continued on page 6)

Last Chance to Bid – The Auction Ends Soon!

Auction Link: <https://legacysells4u.hibid.com/catalog/648165/stephenson-house-benefit-auction>

Don't miss your opportunity to raise your virtual paddle for a great cause! The 1820 Col. Benjamin Stephenson House is wrapping up its spring **Sid Denny Memorial Antiques & Collectibles Online Auction**—in honoring our dear friend and supporter, Sid Denny.

Time Is Running Out – Place Your Bids Today!

The clock is ticking and treasures are going fast! From quirky vintage finds to timeless heirlooms, our auction is packed with unique pieces—and it's your last chance to snag them. New items have been added weekly, but bidding is Ending soon, so don't wait to discover your next great find.

Pickup & Shipping Details

Winning bidders can claim their items:

- **Pickup Days:** July 18 & 19
- **Times:** Friday 5–8 PM | Saturday 8 AM–12 PM
- **Location:** GEM Storage, 447 S. Buchanan St., Edwardsville, IL

Not in the area? No problem! **Shipping is available** for our out-of-town supporters.

Still Have Something to Donate? Hurry!

We're still accepting antiques and collectibles—but time is limited. If you have a vintage treasure you'd like to contribute, contact us today to confirm or arrange a pickup:

- (618) 692-1818
- stephensonhouse1820@yahoo.com

All donations support our ongoing **historic restoration and educational programs**, and are tax-deductible!

Please note:

- We're only accepting antiques and collectibles (no modern items)
- All donations become museum property (no 50/50 splits)
- Unsold items will not be returned

♥ **Every bid and donation helps keep history alive.** Don't miss your chance to be part of this meaningful event—**support the museum and grab something special before it's gone!**

Bid now. Donate today. Time's almost up!





Greetings from the President

Dearest Gentle Volunteers,

It is Summer!!! I hope everybody is enjoying this time.

The Gardens are bloomed! Have you seen them?!?! Go smell some roses and rub some marjoram leaves. Thank You, Master Gardeners!!!

Also thanks to Board Member Leslie Wood, our Sid Denny Memorial Online Antique Auction is Open!!! Get your bids in now. It closes July 16th. Treasures are to be had!!!

<https://legacysells4u.hibid.com/catalog/648165/stephenson-house-benefit-auction>

And lastly, if you have any extra time, please check out the schedule and get a few extra hours to volunteer. We are still in need to be able to keep the house open and to do tours. Thank You ahead of time and you are appreciated.

Now, that is enough for now. Go frolic in the grass and watch the sunset at 8:30PM! Enjoy all this sunshine and see you all at The House.

Yours Truly,

Lady Blue



“No Washboards, No Shortcuts”: Washday on the Illinois Frontier, 1820s

Once a week in early 19th-century Edwardsville, Illinois, the unmistakable smell of woodsmoke, hot soap, and damp linen drifted across the yards and alleys. It was washday, and across town—on farms, in town homes, in kitchens and backyards—women were beginning a chore that would take all day, sometimes two.

This was not the tidy domestic scene we picture today: there were no laundry machines, no detergent pods, and certainly no washboards—those wouldn’t become common in the U.S. until the mid- to late-19th century. Instead, laundry in the 1820s was a physically punishing, skilled process, carried out with boiling water, handmade soap, wooden paddles, chamber lye, and a great deal of muscle.

A Weekly Ritual

Washing clothes was traditionally done on a specific day of the week. Preparation often began the night before, with garments sorted by color and fabric, and soiled items soaked overnight in water, soap, or even chamber lye—a euphemism for aged urine, prized for its ammonia content and powerful stain-lifting ability.

In the morning, fires were kindled early to heat water in a cast-iron kettle suspended over a brick hearth or outdoor tripod. Into the water went shavings of lye soap, often homemade by the household’s women. This soap was created by boiling animal fat with lye, which was leached from hardwood ashes using a drip barrel. A well-made soap could be soft or hard, depending on how long it was cooked and how concentrated the lye.

The garments were added to the hot water and stirred using a long wooden fork. Boiling the clothing served multiple purposes: it loosened dirt and softened up stains for the next round of labor. Soiled household linens—bed sheets, chemises, petticoats, children’s clothing, and dish



towels—were usually first into the pot.

How Much Water Did It Take?

For a household of five—including bed linens, undergarments, shirts, dresses, socks, aprons, and towels—the weekly wash would typically require a large volume of water. While usage varied depending on the family’s needs, available water sources, and cleanliness standards, a reasonable estimate based on period sources is:

- **Boiling water:** 2–3 full kettles (each 20–30 gallons) = **40–90 gallons**

(Laundry, Continued on page 7)

“More American Than *Berry Pie*?”

Rethinking Patriotic Desserts in 1822 Edwardsville

Today, we toss around phrases like “as American as apple pie.” But in 1822 Edwardsville, Illinois—then a bustling frontier hub—that idiom would have felt a bit premature. Apple pie was beloved, sure, but in terms of what actually graced tables at a midsummer celebration like the Fourth of July? The reality was more wild berry than orchard classic.

Let’s examine the sweet contenders for patriotic primacy in early 19th-century Illinois.

Cherry Pie: A Patriotic Symbol Ahead of Its Time

Cherries had deep roots in American soil by the 1820s, introduced by European colonists in the 1600s and thriving in pockets of the Midwest by the early 19th century. Montmorency sour cherries, in particular, found a foothold in Michigan and parts of the old Northwest Territory.

The iconic association between cherries and patriotism stems largely from the George Washington cherry tree myth—a parable so popular by the early 1800s that cherry pie naturally became a symbolic midsummer favorite in the East (Fischer, *Washington’s Cherry Tree Myth*, 2007).

However, cherry trees remained sparse on the Illinois frontier, where orchard cultivation was still nascent and fruit trees were precious. Commercial cherry production wouldn’t truly flourish until later in the century (Michigan Cherry Committee).

Comparative Note: While cherry pie looked the part of patriotic dessert, its availability in 1822 Edwardsville was limited, making it more of an aspirational treat than a community staple.



Berry Pies: The Taste of the American Frontier

Unlike cherries and apples, wild berries needed no orchard. Blackberries, raspberries, dewberries, and blueberries were indigenous to the region and ripened right on time for Independence Day. Indigenous communities and settlers alike gathered them for summer cooking and preserves (Kavasch, *Native Harvests*, 1979).

These berries didn’t require wealth or cultiva-

(Pie, Continued on page 9)

(Celebration, Continued from page 1)

ades of the century. In 1827, *The Boston Centinel* described “an illumination of rockets and wheels, which brought forth shouts from the assembled multitude.”

The Political Power of Patriotism

More than mere festivity, the Fourth of July in the 1820s was also a political theater. As historian Len Travers notes in *Celebrating the Fourth: Independence Day and the Rites of Nationalism in the Early Republic* (University of Massachusetts Press, 1997), the holiday offered citizens a chance to express not only patriotic fervor but also political alignment. Toasts delivered at public dinners often reflected partisan sentiments, particularly in the era’s fierce rivalry between Jeffersonian Republicans and Federalists.

A typical Fourth of July dinner might include upwards of twenty-four formal toasts, each punctuated by cannon fire or musket volleys. These toasts toasted everything from George Washington to “The Heroes of 1776,” from state rights to westward expansion. Newspapers regularly published these lists of toasts, making them part of the broader public discourse.

The Fourth also allowed disenfranchised groups to assert claims to inclusion. African American communities in cities like New York and Philadelphia sometimes held their own Independence Day parades or church services, drawing attention to the gap between American ideals and lived reality. Frederick Douglass would later deliver his famous 1852 speech, “What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?,” but the seeds of such critique were already being sown in the early decades of the century.

Nation-Building and Memory

By the 1820s, the Fourth of July had become an anchor of national identity—a civil religion of sorts. It united Americans across class and region, at least symbolically, in shared celebration of their revolutionary past. The deaths of both John Adams and Thomas Jefferson on July 4, 1826—the nation’s 50th birthday—seemed to many Americans an act of providence, further sanctifying the date in the national consciousness.

Newspapers at the time remarked on the coincidence as a divine sign. *The National Intelligencer* (July 8, 1826) wrote: “The two patriarchs of liberty, who had labored in life to give independence to their country, have gone to

their rest on the very day which crowned their work.”

The 1820s also saw the beginning of what might be called a “founders’ cult.” Local orators often quoted the Founding Fathers in their speeches, and portraits of Washington, Jefferson, and Franklin were paraded through towns or hung in halls.

A Living Holiday

In many ways, the Fourth of July in the 1820s laid the groundwork for the way Americans still observe the holiday today. While it was at times raucous, overtly political, and deeply rooted in local traditions, the essential elements remain: public celebration, patriotic reflection, and the reaffirmation of American identity.

Today’s parades, fireworks, and family gatherings are echoes of those early republic rituals. Understanding how Independence Day was observed in the 1820s helps illuminate how a young nation celebrated its past while shaping its future.

Sources:

Travers, Len. *Celebrating the Fourth: Independence Day and the Rites of Nationalism in the Early Republic*. University of Massachusetts Press, 1997.

Waldstreicher, David. *In the Midst of Perpetual Fetes: The Making of American Nationalism, 1776–1820*. University of North Carolina Press, 1997.

The New-York Evening Post, July 5, 1824.

The Boston Centinel, July 7, 1827.

The National Intelligencer, July 8, 1826.

Douglass, Frederick. “What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?,” Speech, 1852.



1820 Col. Benjamin Stephenson House 2025(c)

(Laundry, Continued from page 4)

- **Rinse tubs:** 2–3 rinses with 10–15 gallons per tub = **30–45 gallons**
- **Total:** **70–135 gallons of water** per washday.

That's up to 60 trips to the well or spring, usually carrying two-gallon buckets. All this water had to be carried, heated, and managed by hand, usually by women and older children. Water from the washing stage was sometimes reused for coarse items, but rinse water had to be fresh, especially for white clothing and the bluing process.

The Beating Process

After boiling, clothes were removed from the kettle and transferred to wooden washtubs. There, they were beaten with battledores—flat wooden paddles used to pound dirt out of the fabric. Sometimes, particularly heavy pieces like sheets or

trousers might be trodden underfoot in a tub to further agitate the fabric.

Clothing might be laid over a beetling board or washing bench, which provided a flat surface for striking with the battledore. This board should not be confused with the later metal-ribbed "washboard"—which had not yet come into use.

Throughout the process, women might also reach for traditional remedies. A pinch of hardwood ash could be rubbed into a greasy stain; chamber lye could be dabbed directly onto cloth or added to the soak water for brightening and whitening.

This method was not delicate—but it was effective.

Bluing and Bleaching

Once clean, clothing was rinsed repeatedly in fresh water. In the final rinse, a bit of bluing was added—a small cloth bag filled with finely ground

(Laundry, Continued on page 8)



(Continued from page 7)

powdered indigo. Swirled in the water (never applied directly to fabric), bluing added a faint blue tint to white cloth, counteracting yellowing and making garments appear whiter and brighter. A well-managed rinse was a point of pride and a sign of domestic skill.

On sunny days, freshly washed linens were sometimes laid out on the grass in an old European tradition known as “bleaching on the green.” Sunlight, chlorophyll, and moisture worked together to brighten fabrics naturally. Otherwise, garments were wrung by hand and hung to dry on fences, bushes, or rope lines stretched between trees.

Starching and Ironing

Once dry, certain garments were starched for a crisp appearance. Starch was made at home by cooking grated potatoes or flour into a thick paste and then diluting it in water. Clothing was dipped, dried partially, and then pressed using cast-iron flatirons heated over coals on the hearth.

Ironing was an art of its own—flatirons were heavy, lacked temperature control, and cooled quickly, requiring frequent reheating. Too hot, and they could scorch the cloth; too cool, and they were useless.

Who Did the Laundry?

In frontier households like that of Colonel Benjamin Stephenson in Edwardsville, laundry was the responsibility of the women of the household, including wives, daughters, indentured servants, and—in many households—enslaved people. At the Stephenson House, records indicate the presence of indentured laborers like Winn, Hannah, and others who would have undertaken this labor-intensive work.

Younger girls like 13-year-old Elvira Stephenson may have assisted with sorting, carrying water, wringing clothing, and hanging out the wash. Even small children might help fetch kindling or gather clothes pegs.

The task was physically demanding, seasonal

(harder in winter, more pleasant in spring), and considered a cornerstone of household management. A woman’s reputation could be enhanced—or tarnished—by the condition of her family’s linens.

More Than a Chore

Laundry in the 1820s was far more than domestic drudgery—it was a practice rooted in science, resourcefulness, and tradition. Women used available resources with remarkable ingenuity: waste became cleaning agent, ashes became soap, sunlight became bleach.

The task required chemical knowledge (how to make lye and manage pH), physical stamina, and time management, all under challenging conditions. Yet this labor, largely invisible in the public record, was vital to household health and dignity.

Bringing Washday to Life

For those interpreting life on the frontier today—whether at historical sites, in classrooms, or through storytelling—washday is a window into the lives of women and domestic laborers in early Illinois. It reveals not only the physical challenges of frontier life but also the knowledge, care, and community woven into the fabric of daily chores.

The next time you fold a load of laundry, take a moment to imagine boiling a kettle over a fire, stirring lye and linen with a wooden stick, and laying your family’s garments on the grass to bleach under the spring sun.





(Pie, Continued from page 5)

tion—just a willingness to forage. By the 1820s, berry pies had become a staple of rural desserts. The first written mention of blueberry pie appears in 1829, but oral and culinary traditions strongly suggest much earlier usage ([Feiring, Foraging & Feasting, 2013]).

Comparative Note: On the frontier, berry pies were the practical favorite: seasonal, symbolic of the land itself, and—perhaps most importantly—delicious.

Apple and Marlborough Pies: Familiar but Off-Season

Apples were central to early American cuisine. Dried, sauced, cellared—they were the pantry standby. Apple pie itself was already iconic, and Marlborough pie (a spiced apple-custard tart from New England, published in *American Cookery*, 1796) was a beloved import.

But July wasn't apple season. Without refrigeration, fresh apples from the previous fall were likely long gone by midsummer, and the preserved varieties lacked the sensory appeal of seasonal fruit

pies.

Comparative Note: Apple pie might have been emotionally “American,” but on a sweltering July 4th in 1822 Edwardsville, it wasn't the most likely dessert—nor the most festive.

What Was Actually on the Table in Edwardsville, 1822?

Based on local ecology, agricultural records, and documented culinary habits, a typical Fourth of July dessert spread in Edwardsville likely included:

- Wild berry pies (especially blackberry and raspberry)
- Shortcakes topped with fresh berries and cream
- Rustic cobblers or hand pies
- Possibly cherry pie, if local trees or preserves were available
- Cider cakes, seed cakes, or gingerbread using stored staples

These desserts reflected the land, season, and ingenuity of frontier cooks—especially women—who crafted celebration meals from what nature and preservation allowed.

Rewriting the Phrasebook: What Was More American in 1822?

If we define “American” as national mythology:

Cherry pie wins the symbolic crown.

If we define “American” as accessible, seasonal, and authentically regional:

Berry pie was the true Fourth of July favorite in places like Edwardsville.

Maybe the most accurate patriotic slogan of the day would have been:

“As American as berry pie.”



Spode on the Half Shell,

July 26, 1-2:30 pm

Celebrate the season with a seaside twist! Join us for a delightful Christmas in July workshop where you'll create your own Spode-inspired shell ornament—perfect for gifting, decorating, or using as a charming little trinket holder.

Using natural scallop shells and classic blue-and-white Spode-style paper, we'll guide you through a relaxing decoupage process to craft a keepsake that blends vintage elegance with beachy cheer.

✦ Workshop Details:

Limited to 8 adults (ages 16 and up)

\$12 per person – all supplies provided

Sip tea from real Spode china and enjoy festive cookies as we craft. Bonus points for wearing your best holiday-in-July flair (Santa hats + sandals encouraged!).

Whether it hangs on a tree or holds your favorite rings, this little shell is sure to bring joy all year round.

Visit www.stephensonhouse.org for tickets.

Upcoming Events, Tours & Activities

- July 4, **House** will be **closed** for the holiday. We'll return to regular hours on Saturday, July 5.
- July 16, **Sid Denny Memorial Antique Auction**, bidding closes at 6 pm
- July 26, **Spode on the Half Shell** (workshop), 1-2:30 pm. Celebrate Christmas in July with a seaside twist! Join us for a cozy afternoon crafting a Spode-style decoupaged shell ornament—perfect as a gift, keepsake or trinket holder. Includes supplies, tea in real Spode china, and festive treats. *Limited to 8 adults (16+), \$12/person.*
- July 29, **Board Meeting**, 7 pm



Sun Mon Tue Wed Thu Fri Sat

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|----|----|--------------------------------|--|----|--|---|
| | | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4  | 5 |
| 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | 11 | 12 |
| 13 | 14 | 15 | 16 Antique Auction Ends 6 pm | 17 | 18 | 19 |
| 20 | 21 | 22 | 23 | 24 | 25 | 26 Spode on the Half Shell 1-2:30 pm |
| 27 | 28 | 29 Board Meeting 7 pm | 30 | 31 | | |

Be Our Friend...

*Renew your membership or become a new Friend.
Fill out and mail the following information to us.*

YES! I want to help. Enclosed is my contribution:

Name: _____

Street Address: _____

City, State & ZIP: _____

Phone: _____

Email: _____

Amount Enclosed: _____ Membership Level: _____

Please send me information about volunteering at Stephenson House.

Checks should be made payable to the:

Friends of the Col. Benjamin Stephenson House

Payments may also be made in our online store:

www.stephensonhouse.org

***Memberships are from January to December.** Benefits of membership are extended to an individual and his/her immediate family. We accept cash, check or credit card donations. Memberships are extended for monetary donations only. The Friends of Col. Benjamin Stephenson House is a 501c3 not-for-profit organization FIN 37-1395804



**Send your membership to the
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Membership Levels

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\$25

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\$50

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\$100

Heritage Friend
\$250

Living History Friend
\$500

Founding Friend
\$1,000 or more

**Corporate membership information
available upon request.**

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P.O. Box 754

409 S. Buchanan St.

Edwardsville, IL 62025

Email: stephensonhouse1820@yahoo.com

www.stephensonhouse.org

618-692-1818