

THE VILLAGE OF METTAWA

A BRIEF COLLOQUIAL HISTORY & TIMELINE

COMPILED FOR THE OCCASION OF THE VILLAGE'S 65TH ANNIVERSARY CELEBRATION ON AUGUST 23, 2025

Prehistory
An ancient ocean recedes. Native eco-systems evolve: prairies, wetlands, woods of hickory, oak, maple, and basswood.

10,000 years ago
The first peoples inhabit this land, using stone implements to hunt.

1695
Potawatami live in Lake County. French establish Little Fort trading post (now Waukegan).

1833
Daniel Wright becomes Lake County's first settler and builds his cabin with Chief Mettawa's help.

1844
First plat-claims filed on govt. surveyed land.

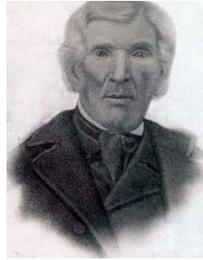
1864
First teacher hired by Rondout School District (\$18/mo).

1917
Rondout School built.

1. IN THE BEGINNING

A vast ocean once covered Mettawa. Once it receded, a complex landscape of native plants emerged, and tall-grass prairies, and woods of hickory-oak and maple-basswood filled the land. No earthworms lived here then, but the native crawfish evolved to survive on dry land, and muskrats and deer made themselves at home. Sometime, probably within the past 10,000 years, the first people entered Mettawa. They made camps, chipped arrowheads, and hunted and fished the waters and lands. By 1695, Prairie Potawatami Indians lived in Lake County. They

traveled and hunted in this area, with two villages just south of our borders. In 1833, Daniel Wright learned about the fertile ground at Half-Day from two French-Native traders living in the bluffs near Waukegan, or Little Fort. He became Lake County's first permanent settler when he built a house with Chief Mettawa's



help. The native people considered Wright a friend and even sent for a doctor when his wife was sick. When a fire burned his buildings, Mettawa helped him rebuild. In 1836, the U.S. government forced the Potawatomi to leave these lands, but their memory lives on in the old horseback trails, bent trail marker trees, arrowhead relics, and the name given in tribute by our founders to the "Village of Mettawa."

2. RURAL FARMLAND

In 1839, Mettawa was still part of McHenry County, and the earliest settlers here claimed long swaths of property straddling the "Aux Plein" river along the Milwaukee Trail. They built crude cabins, and more settlers followed. In 1844, the Bradleys, Atkinsons and others filed the first plat claims on the newly surveyed acres, and soon



wooden farmhouses dotted the land. This forested area east of the Des Plaines river may have been difficult to farm (due to poorly drained soil with low permeability) but residents could stay current with news published in "The Little Fort Porcupine and Democratic Banner," Lake County's first newspaper, founded in 1845. Our area was known as "Little Ireland,"

and many residents likely attended St. Patrick's Church, founded in 1844 in nearby Everett (now west Lake Forest). The Rondout School District's first teacher started in 1864 at \$18 per month; it counted 46 students in 1917 when the oldest part of the present school was built. By the early 1900s many small farms had become part of large country estates. Yet, dairy farms near the corner of St. Mary's and Rt. 60 continued into the 1980s, and even today many Mettawa residents enjoy agricultural pursuits.

HORSE TALES

WESTERN The palomino reining champion "Hollywood Jac 86," moved here in 1972 then earned over \$1 million as a sire. World Champion quarter horse "Physical Ed" was based here too.

OLYMPIC RIDING The 2000 Summer Olympic Show Jumping Squad included Todd Minikus, a rider who trained in Mettawa.

BRIDLE PATHS In years past, neighbors met for "breakfast rides" on bridle trails that crossed property lines.

SIGHTS SEEN

Once neighbors could talk for hours on Bradley Road without a single car passing. It wasn't unusual to be interrupted by a runaway horse, lost llama or noisy exotic animals at the corner of Bradley and Old School Road. More than one person was known to be surprised by a pony or flock of sheep showing up at their barn after a night of parties and forgotten deals. Even the most gracious among us may have been out-done, however, by a busload of visiting Japanese architecture students. Lost on Little St. Mary's Rd, and stuck in the mud, they thanked their rescuer by exiting their bus and bowing in unison.

MAYORS

1960–1981 James "Jim" Getz
 1981–1991 Ed Fitzsimons
 1991–1994 Julius Abler
 1994–2009 Barry MacLean
 2009–2012 Jess Ray
 2013–2025 Casey Urlacher



1927 Mettawa Manor built

1938 Adlai Stevenson house built

1951 Mettawa zoned 5-acres by Lake County

1960 Village of Mettawa incorporated with 118 residents & 1200 acres

1970 Mettawa's population was 275

1975 Bradley road paved

1989 Mettawa Open Lands was formed

1996 Grainger Woods Forest Preserve is created

1998 Adlai Stevenson home opened public

2000 Ribbon-cutting of the Mettawa Trail

2010 Mettawa celebrates 50 years

2020 Village added 30 households, a new record

2025 Happy Birthday! 65 years

3. GRACIOUS COUNTRY ESTATES

In the early 1900s many prominent citizens came to Mettawa for its land and gracious estate lifestyle. Samuel Insull, co-founder of General Electric, bought 120 acres south of Libertyville in 1902, eventually owning 4115 acres on both sides of the river as well as the old railroad along Highway 176. Melody Farm's 1200 acres were collected in 1904 by J. Ogden Armour and its greenhouse area included today's

Little Melody Lane/Indian Ridge. Francis Farwell of Lake Forest assembled Deerpath Farm in 1922 before selling it to Edward H. Bennett, the 1909 Plan of Chicago's co-author. The famous Adlai Stevenson II bought 70 acres from Insull in 1935 to build his modern house near the Des Plaines river. Lloyd Lewis built a Frank Lloyd Wright house nearby in 1940. Helen Hayes and Harpo Marx attended Lewis'

housewarming party. Other prominent visitors to the area included Stevenson's friend Eleanor Roosevelt, who rode at the McGowan/Korhumel track (now Whippoorwill Park). Horses outnumbered people, then. Regular fox-hunts took place through the 1930s, and trail rides still do. The early bridle paths, marked on stones and medallions, were connected to trails throughout the North Shore.

4. THRIVING LAND & LIFESTYLE

After 1945, development rapidly spread through Lake County, but area residents wanted to preserve Mettawa's land and character. In 1951 Lake County granted their petition for 5-acre zoning, and the Des Plaines River Association formed in 1957 to add community support. After much hard work by our founders, the Village of Mettawa was incorporated in 1960. This meant Mettawa could truly protect its 5-acre zoning while enjoying a good relationship with the new Lake County Forest Preserve District. Jim Getz, the Village's first president, served until 1981. That same year, the MacArthur Woods Forest Preserve

was dedicated as a 446 acre Illinois Nature Preserve and is now one of the Des Plaines River Trail's most beautiful areas. Today, some of Lake County's largest remaining woodland areas are located in Mettawa. Every resident lives within a mile of a Forest Preserve and near the Mettawa Trail. The Village continues to acquire and protect municipal land. As of 2025, Mettawa owns over 200 acres of protected open space, including Whippoorwill Park, MacLean Preserve at Oasis Park, Everett Pond, and Mettawa Savanna. By planting trees, adding benches and removing buckthorn from newly purchased corner

lots, the Village continues to build a more beautiful, welcoming community. Quiet yet innovative, Mettawa sets the standard for a rural way of life.

Below: Barry MacLean's bench dedication, June 2, 2022, at MacLean Preserve at Oasis Park

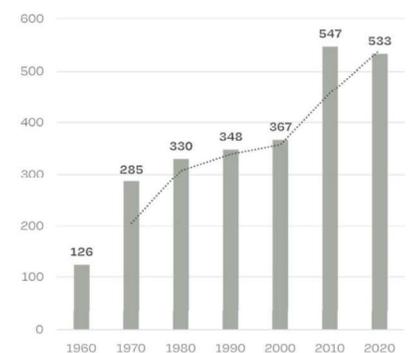


5. HOW WE HAVE GROWN

Mettawa's first budget was announced to the world "by posting copies in three prominent places around the Village of Mettawa on July 11, 1960, no newspaper being published within the Village and the Village having less than 500 population." That first budget of \$8,850.00 has grown over the years, to a recently approved budget of \$4.4 million. This growth reflects the Village's consistent fiscal responsibility and careful management, along with a focus on resident needs. Careful oversight of expenditures and projects by the Mayors and Board of Trustees members, past and present, has proven key to Mettawa's success. Since 2005, Mettawa's popular tax

rebate program has provided \$8 million in rebates to residents, even as the real estate tax levy has remained at \$135,000 for the past 27 years. This remarkable amenity has been possible because our community includes both private residents and commercial neighbors, such as Costco, Grainger, and the Lake Forest Oasis, as well as smaller ventures. Meanwhile, the Village's largest assets are the municipally owned properties and paved streets. Mettawa continues to invest in its land by removing buckthorn and other invasives, and planting trees to foster healthy, beautiful landscapes for our community.

Below: Mettawa's population is now 533 residents. Source: 2020 U.S. Census.



The Mettawa History Project was compiled by resident Linda Gardner Phillips.