



Built by March 1843, the house at 109 East Market was home to the Sanxay family (pronounced Sank-say), who played important roles in early Iowa City, and to Eugene Gilmore, retired University of Iowa president, in the 1940s.

## *Sanxay-Gilmore: Iowa City's Oldest House*

BUILT BY 1843, the Sanxay-Gilmore House at 109 Market is the oldest remaining house within the original city limits. It stands with Old Capitol as Iowa City's oldest structures.

A building's historic significance lies in its architectural integrity and in its association with the people and events from the past. The Sanxay-Gilmore House is rich in both. The physical house and the story of the people who lived in it tell us much about Iowa City's history. Saving this house means an elegant and sound building will remain useful and relevant long into our future.

### **Helping a Town Grow and Flourish**

THE SANXAY FAMILY, for whom the house is named, is interwoven in Iowa City's history almost from the beginning. The year before the Sanxays arrived, the town had been platted, Robert Lucas as territorial governor had made his first visit, and Chauncey Swan had contracted with an architect for a new capitol.

In February 1840, Frederic Sanxay and his 21-year-old son, Theodore, arrived with a stock of goods to sell to the emigrants pouring into this "embryo city," as one town founder called it. The first sawmill couldn't keep up with carpenters' demands. Fortunately that April Sylvanus Johnson began making bricks, such that on July 4, the Sanxays and business partner Malcolm Murray dedicated their store, the town's first two-story brick structure. The same day the cornerstone of the capitol was set in place.

By 1841, young Theodore Sanxay had purchased Lot 3 at Clinton and Market streets, envisioning a family home there. He married Hettie Perry in 1842. The two-story house built for the couple (probably of Sylvanus Johnson's bricks) was finished in time for the birth of their first son, Theodore Frederic Sanxay, in March 1843. Second son James Perry Sanxay was also born in the house, in 1846. Another son died before age three.

The house was built in the popular and elegant Greek Revival style, as was the nearby capitol. As the family's economic standing grew, so did their home. The adjoining Lot 4 was purchased. An addition with Italianate de-



tails was added to the west. More additions followed.

Every morning, from his fine brick home at 109 East Market, Theodore Sanxay strode out into the busy world of Iowa City civic life and commerce. He was quickly becoming a mover and shaker. By 1844, he was a trustee and founding member of First Presbyterian Church. (Twelve years later, the stately building we now call Old Brick would be built diagonally across Market Street from his home.) Starting in the 1850s he helped push local manufacturing, plan a high school, and promote the town's first railroad. He served as a director, vice president, and acting president of the Johnson County Savings Bank.

The store the Sanxays had started in 1840 had shifted to selling hardware and iron in a new location at Clinton and Washington. The brick building there grew from two stories to three, and expanded to the east. Years later the building became known as Whetstone's and it now houses Pancho's. But for decades it was referred to simply as Sanxay's Corner, so integral was the family to the town.

Although J. P. Sanxay, the second son, ran the store, he "developed for everything like business, and all its activities, such intense antipathy, to render him almost morbid," according to his brother. Although he took up other interests and moved away, J. P. and his wife retired to the family home at 109 E. Market, where he died in 1901.

Meanwhile, his brother, Theodore Frederic, had become an attorney in the East. He still read Iowa City newspapers and tried to visit every year. He wrote the Old Settlers Association in 1908, "The circumstance of my birth in Iowa City gives me a great affection for the place, and I confess that, though the major part of my life has been lived elsewhere, as the years roll on I find my thoughts turning more and more to the old home of my boyhood, and I begin to feel that I should like to end my life there, where it began." He died in New York in 1925 but was buried here in Oakland Cemetery. An impressive monument marks his grave.

His love of his hometown extended to the University of Iowa. His estate established an annual award for a liberal arts graduate; the award still exists as the Sanxay Prize. The initial gift for the prize was \$15,000—equal to \$220,000 in today's dollars.



## Sharing a History with the University

IN 1946, EUGENE AND BLANCHE GILMORE bought "the little neo-classic house on East Market street," as Blanche described it. Eugene Gilmore served as University of Iowa president from 1934 to 1940 (and before that, as vice governor-general of the Philippine Islands, and then professor and dean of the UI law school). Despite the troubling economic times of the Great Depression, the university under his leadership added the Law Commons, Hillcrest Residence Hall, the Theatre Building, and the Art Building to the campus.

According to Blanche Gilmore, the Sanxay-Gilmore House's large foundation stones were "left over from the construction of the capitol building."

If that's accurate, that certainly seems fitting, because the Sanxays, arriving here even before Old Capitol was begun, were certainly part of the foundation of this community. Their 1843 house—and its juxtaposition to the downtown and campus—is a compelling reminder of the early days in Iowa City, when bricks were just becoming available but entrepreneurship and civic values were already paramount.

—by Ginalie Swaim and Alicia Trimble

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*Note: This 6/6/20 article is derived from a longer piece by Swaim and Trimble first distributed in November 2017.*