Imagine if you will, a riverfront packed with manufacturing companies, mills, quarries, loading docks, and riverboat traffic. This was the vision of James Mason when he purchased the land that is now Grafton, Illinois.
Welcome to Grafton

It all starts with the Rivers! People have moved themselves, their belongings and materials up and down the rivers since prehistoric times. They have looked for places to go, places to cross and places to stop. Grafton is located at the confluence of two great rivers, the Mississippi and the Illinois.

Among the first human inhabitants of the Grafton area were the Mississippians who left their imprint upon the land in the form of hundreds of mounds throughout the area. Later American Indians occupied the territory, among them the Illinois Confederacy. By 1673, Europeans Father Jacques Marquette and a fur trader named Louis Joliet arrived. These are the first known white men in the area.

This tour is a guide to how Grafton developed, grew and provided livelihoods and homes for individuals and diverse groups of people. You will find the Lighthouse on markers throughout Grafton. Each marker will highlight the people, events and structures that contributed to the history of Grafton. Numbers correspond to the descriptions and map in this booklet.

Sources:
“Blood, Sweat and Grafton” by Anna Mae Hopley
“Survival: Grafton’s Tenacity” edited by Slaten M. Bray
“Visions of the Past” compiled by Mary Ann Patton Pitchford and Carol Stephens Wallace
Documents from the Jersey County Historical Society
Tom Wright, Grafton Historian and Archivist

THANK YOU FOR VISITING GRAFTON AND LEARNING A BIT ABOUT OUR HISTORY AND US. STAY LONG, COME BACK OFTEN!
1. THE WHARF

One of the earliest structures in the new community of Grafton was a wharf built from earthwork covered with planks. It served as a focal point for the fishing and shipping businesses in the city. The "Old Wharf" was destroyed by the flood of 1844. In 1846, a "New Wharf" was constructed of limestone quarried from the road being built to link Grafton and Carrollton. In 1910, the Jersey Fish Market was brought to Grafton from Havana, Illinois by W. H. Shafer. Subsequently he had a pond made next to the wharf in which to keep small fish and turtles and the area became known as "Shafer's Pond". The pond would freeze in cold winters and locals enjoyed ice-skating there.

Located near the confluence of the Mississippi and Illinois Rivers (the exact mouth of the Illinois River has fluctuated over time), the Wharf provided an important access point for passengers, products and goods. Because of its location, it is natural that river industries should have sprung up. The Cherokee Packet Company was established around 1840 on the original Mason Landing at the foot of Oak Street. Grafton businessmen purchased a stern-wheel steamboat, the Allegheny Mail, to develop commerce between Grafton and St. Louis in 1849. Eventually they added 2 more boats to their fleet shipping wood, grain and produce. These and other packet boats brought goods to and from Grafton until the early 1900s.

For many years showboats plied the rivers announcing their arrival by a calliope that could be heard for half a mile. When the boat docked, there was a large crowd waiting. Among the showboats that brought such excitement were: the Cotton Blossom, French's New Sensation, Golden Road, Price's Water Queen, Columbia, American and Eisenbarth-Henderson. Excursion boats were also popular, among them the Majestic, Quincy and Idlewild.
In addition to the Old Wharf, the city's founder James Mason built a wharf at the east end of the community and his brother Paris's wharf was located in the west end of town where Springfield Street meets the river.

2. FLOODS!!!

Floods have always been part of the rhythm of life in Grafton. The 1844 Flood was so high it drove all merchants and residents from the business district in the bottom. The water was so deep that steamboats moored in Jersey and Distillery Hollows and a bridge was built over the area now known as The Grove Memorial Park.

The 1973 Flood was a warm-up for the Great Flood of 1993 that devastated Grafton and the Riverbend area. Flooding began in July and when it receded in November many structures (businesses and residences) were damaged, 22 of them so seriously that they were removed. After fighting the flood for 5 months, some residents left town, but most rolled up their sleeves and began the process of cleaning up and rebuilding.

Local resident Larry Wright envisioned a lighthouse as a symbol of the city's rise since the Great Flood of 1993. Mr. Wright said “Floods of various sizes occur in Grafton almost every year, most of which the locals call “high water”. We don’t consider high water a flood until it covers Main Street. When that occurs, it affects our lives, requiring detours, store closings, loss of tourism business and jobs.” This lighthouse and those marking the historic sites on this tour celebrate the resilience of the people of our community.

19. FISHING

Commercial fishing has always been extensive in Grafton, at one time earning it the title of "Gloucester of Illinois". Buffalo, Carp, Catfish, Channel, Blue and other fish varieties including Spoonbill and Sturgeon were plentiful in the waters of the Mississippi and Illinois Rivers. In the 1800s it was the largest freshwater fishing port on the Mississippi.

Grafton fishermen of early times fished the Illinois because of its less powerful current and because of its mud bottom. This made it easy to use wing nets with one pole upstream to anchor the net and two others downstream set wide apart. From the first, fishermen used distinctive knots and other markers to identify their nets. The fish caught in a marked net were left by other fishermen for the owners. Fish were then cleaned, salted, and packed in barrels for shipment.

As early as the 1880's, a demand for shells of the river mussels existed. After removing the mussels from the river bottom, they were cooked and the shells were used to make buttons. Often pearls and slugs (imperfect pearls) were found inside. A factory for making buttons was located across from the present day Grafton Winery.
17. BALL FIELD

Bill Stuart and his family built their home and fish market just west of the present ball diamond. The ball diamond was part of their property and baseball was played here for as long as people can remember. In 1938, the family donated property to the City of Grafton in Bill’s honor with the stipulation that the property would always be used to play baseball. The City has kept its promise and has upgraded the facility with lights, a backstop and resurfacing.

Professional baseball player Ed Baecht played his first games on this field. He played professional baseball from 1924-1937 for the Philadelphia Phillies, Chicago Cubs and St. Louis Browns as a pitcher.

18. SALOONS

The early Irish and German residents were fun loving people who had parades and drinking contests every week. Grafton had a band that paraded down Main Street swinging their brass instruments.

The saloon business was a very profitable enterprise during the steamboat era and quarry boom (as it is today!). There were 26 saloons that operated during this time. The old timers say, “It seems there was a saloon at every other door and it was a necessity to have so many to quench the thirst of the many Irish and Germans.” Many of the saloons were just an extra room in a house.

The most infamous establishment was the River House that was located west of town at the present location of the Girls School. It was at the River House that blood thirsty murderers, robbers, horse thieves, bushwhackers, and other corrupted men of various descriptions were said to have been harbored. It is believed that outlaw Jesse James and his gang were no strangers to the River House and it was reported that Jesse played cards with the Jersey County Sheriff. The River House was razed in the early 1900’s.

Pete Freiman was born in Daggett Hollow of German immigrant parents. At 18, he served an apprenticeship in St. Louis to learn the craft of boat building. He returned to Grafton in 1881 to establish his own business which prospered for 50 years. The “Freiman skiff”, was known to every fishing colony from Keokuk, Iowa to New Orleans as “the famous fisherman’s special”. The Freiman skiff was usually twenty four feet in length with a pointed bow and square stern. The gunwales and framing ribs were white oak which was then plentiful in the area.

3. SHIPBUILDING

Frank Rippley first came to Grafton in 1876 to work for Brook Stafford. He and his brothers eventually bought the Stafford stove and tin business and expanded that business to include a hardware and general merchandise store, an undertaking and embalming business, a livery stable, and a cooper shop. They also founded Rippley Manufacturing Company to produce livestock feeders and feed cookers. In 1892, they incorporated the Rippley Boat Company located at the foot of Oak Street. They and the Fleak Ship Company became renowned nationwide for the barges, steam towboats, ferries, lifeboats and other vessels they built. The company evolved into the Grafton Boat Works. The buildings that are now the Loading Dock Bar and Restaurant were built in 1928 to accommodate their expanding boat construction and repair business.

4. QUARRIES AND POWDER MILL

Tons of magnesia limestone were quarried in Grafton making the quarries, located east of where you are now standing, the richest and most extensive of the town’s resources. At one time there were five quarries at or near Grafton that employed up to 2,000 men. Magnesia limestone does not slack into lime when burned and is a beautiful cream, buff color. Although stone was quarried from the time of the first settlement, Silas Farrington and John Loler began large scale quarrying in 1856. Grafton stone was used to construct the First Presbyterian Church
of Jerseyville, Jersey County Court House, government buildings in Rock Island, and the Old Lindell Hotel and Eads Bridge in St. Louis. The quarries brought a flow of immigrants from Ireland and Germany to add to the early settlers from New England.

Charles Brainerd came to Grafton from Rome, New York as a Civil War veteran to work for the Grafton Stone and Transportation Company. Starting as a clerk, he served as superintendent of the quarry for 30 years starting in 1866. Brainerd and his wife Hattie built this red brick house on a rock-faced limestone foundation in 1885 as a home for their four children. Brainerd also served several terms as Grafton's mayor.

In December 1907, a manufacturing plant owned by the Illinois Powder Manufacturing Company was built in Babbs Hollow, one mile east of Grafton. During the next 50 years explosives were produced consisting of ammonia nitrate, nitroglycerine and dynamite. The plant offered a means of livelihood but also offered considerable hazard. At least 15 people were killed in the mill. Once when dynamite was being moved to the magazine on the top of the hill, the cart broke loose and rolled downhill into the boxcar. The boxcar loaded with dynamite blew up with such force that the boxcar wheels were found on the Missouri side of the river. After purchasing the plant in 1957, American Cyanamid of New York closed it on March 1, 1960.

5. MASONIC LODGE
The Grafton Stone and Transportation Company built this limestone building with locally quarried stone in 1869. All of the door latches, hinges, door lintels, desk fixtures, wall sconces, lamp stands and the massive chandeliers were hammered by hand at a forge on the site. The upper story contained “Armory Hall”, a 30’ x 70’ hall used for public purposes. In 1885, the building was purchased by the Grafton Full Moon Masonic Lodge #341. Masonic activities have been held at the site since that time.

16. MASON HOLLOW AND DAGGET HOLLOW
Paris Mason, brother of founder James Mason, had a falling out with the family and moved west of Grafton to Mason Hollow. He built a house and warehouse, opened a store and began to transact considerable business at what was called Mason’s Landing, also Upper Grafton. His stone house is at the foot of Springfield Street behind Rowling Service Store and now serves as a guest house.

The next hollow west is called Dagget Hollow. An old stone bridge is evidence of the original road that went west from Grafton toward Pere Marquette and the infamous River House. A two-story brick building was constructed by the Brinton brothers in 1876 for Carl Albert and contained a grocery store. Peter Freiman constructed his first “Freiman Skiff” in this building. The structure was destroyed in the 1973 flood.
this building and the school was relocated to Grafton Hills Drive high above the flood plain. The stones used to build the wall in front of the Grafton Winery are from the old stone school.

The 1872 rules that guided teachers' lives included the following.
1. Teachers each day will fill lamps and clean lamp chimneys.
2. Each teacher will bring a bucket of water and a scuttle of coal for the day's session.
3. Women teachers who marry or engage in unseemly conduct will be dismissed.
4. Men teachers may take one evening each week for courting purposes, or two evenings a week if they go to church regularly.

Edith Brands operated a movie theater on the lower level until the late 1950's. An earlier movie theater, the Gem Theater, was located in the Rippley Opera House and featured silent movies as well as community gatherings.

6. BANK
James M. Allen and his son-in-law Edmund A. Pinero established the first bank in Grafton in 1871. They served as directors with Christopher P. Stafford and Ernst Meysenburg. The bank operated as a private concern until 1873. The door to the vault of their bank can be viewed at the Visitors Center. This building was constructed in 1913 as a bank after the original building that housed a drug store burned. The building constructed by Mr. Meysenburg was considered "fire and burglar proof and modern in every respect." The building served as Grafton's Post Office until the mid-1960's.

7. GODFREY BUILDING
This Greek Revival building was erected by Jacob Godfrey in the 1840's of local limestone as a general store. Godfrey was a tailor by trade. He also served as Constable for several terms. In 1858, Godfrey partnered with Henry Eastman to build another general store that served the community with at least 3 other general stores. The Godfrey building was mostly used as a general store, but served as the town's post office for some time.

15. ST. PATRICK’S CHURCH
In 1673, Father Marquette said the first mass in this vicinity, followed by Father Hennepin who camped here in 1680. For several years in the 1800s, Catholic services were held in the Methodist Church, a room over a store, the quarry hall, and in several private residences. By 1857 there were many Irish Catholic
According to the Jersey County Democrat, on February 1, 1867 Grafton’s business community was comprised of:

- 5 general stores
- 2 blacksmith shops
- 1 drugstore
- 1 wagon shop
- 1 butcher shop
- 2 shoe shops
- 1 harness maker
- 1 tin shop
- 2 flour/grist mills
- 1 watchmaker and silversmith
- 1 mill for sawing rock
- 3 cooper shops
- 1 hotels
- 2 physicians.

8. RUEBEL HOTEL

Michael Ruebel was born in Bavaria in 1834 and came to Grafton in 1863 after serving four months in the army during the Civil War. He worked three years at the cooper’s trade, and then moved to saloon keeping and eventually added the hotel business.

In 1884, Ruebel began construction on a three-story brick building with a stone foundation that became the Ruebel Hotel. It was estimated to cost $7,000 and was the largest hotel in Jersey County. The hotel had 32 rooms and also included a parlor, office, billiard room, store and dining room as well as a large kitchen. The Ruebel family remained in the hotel business for many years. An 1895 advertisement offered a Fourth of July stay for $1.00 to $1.50 in a hotel with all the “Latest Modern Improvements”.

The hotel was destroyed by fire in 1912 and the present structure was built to replace it. The burled walnut bar in the hotel was originally part of the Bavarian Exhibit at the 1904 World’s Fair in St. Louis and was transported to Grafton by steamboat. The bar was saved when numerous patrons and citizens carried it out of the building during floods. The Hotel has changed hands several times. For many years Charles Amburg, descendent of Michael Ruebel operated it.

local distillery where “spirits” were created. It was also the location of the first Baptist church in Grafton. Imagine this area in 1844 when flood waters were so deep that steamships anchored in the Hollows.

Dr. Gideon Dempsey’s family home, garage, fishpond, and dental office once occupied this area. The property included a beautiful grove of pecan trees. The 1993 flood destroyed all structures on the property and the City acquired the land. It was then named “The Grove Memorial Park”.

13. ICE HOUSES

The river also supported residents in winter. Cutting ice for summer use became a successful industry. Several ice houses, such as the one built about 1840 behind the Jeni J’s Gift Shop, were filled each winter with ice and insulated with sawdust. Ice on the unpolluted river was marked in twenty-inch squares and cut. A runway to the riverbank was constructed to transport the newly cut ice. The going price for delivery of 100 pounds was about fifty cents. It was common for ice houses to burn from spontaneous combustion.

For many years, Albert Auston furnished ice to the local residents and all businesses. The story goes that one day he dropped a 40 pound block of ice into the meat refrigerator at Burns’ Store. Everyone in the place jumped and Auston reacted by turning around and remarking “Dropped my false teeth!”

14. SCHOOLS

Mr. Brock was the schoolmaster for the first term of school in Grafton. He taught all eight grades in a one room log cabin on this site. In 1838, an 18x24 foot frame schoolhouse was erected and in 1858 a stone structure was built. This stone structure served the town as a school until one night in 1870 when the building and all its contents, including the library, were destroyed by fire. In 1874, an elegant three-story structure was constructed of native stone. The building was razed in 1967 to make way for a new school on the site. The flood of 1993 was not kind to
11. METHODIST CHURCH
The first residents of the small settlement of Grafton were from the southern and eastern states. They were mainly of English or German extraction with the predominate religion being Methodist and were the first to establish a church in town. In 1836 the Methodists held religious services in a warehouse. In 1837, they built a small frame church on the hill near the vicinity of Baby Hollow. Later this building was torn down and church services were then held in a school house. The daughter of Grafton founder James Mason donated the lot on which the present church, “a fine brick structure”, was built in 1857. Before St. Patrick’s Church was built, this church was used for services by the increasing number of the Roman Catholic faith who fled from tyranny and famine in Europe and emigrated to Grafton to find employment in the quarries.

9. BABY HOLLOW
Periodically epidemics of virulent diseases like smallpox and cholera spread along the river towns. To isolate the unfortunate sick, Grafton, like most cities or villages had a “Pest House”. A large one room log cabin was built far into Baby Hollow and over the years was home to hundreds of sick men, women, and children. The sick cared for each other. Wagons of supplies were taken halfway to the Pest House. Those who were able carried the supplies the rest of the way to the house. Records indicate that in addition to burial, many bodies, clothes and belongings were burned after death to help prevent the spread of disease. The Pest House was razed in the early 1900’s leaving only a few reminders and, some say, the ghosts of those who lived and died there.

10. FOUNDING OF GRAFTON
James Mason was born in Grafton, Massachusetts in July, 1783. He was engaged in trade in the West Indies and worked in New York City as a partner in the wholesale grocery business. He came west settling in Edwardsville where he invested in real estate. In August 1818 he married Sarah Von Phul, sister of a prominent St. Louis businessman. James Mason was issued a license to operate a ferry across the Mississippi River at Grafton in 1833. He and his friend, Dr. Silas Hamilton and leading St. Louis businessmen envisioned a town where Grafton is now located. In 1833, Mason and his partners were incorporated as the “Grafton Manufacturing Company” to establish grist, woolen, and cotton mills and to do general manufacturing, trading and shipping. Both Mason and Hamilton died in 1834 before their plans could become reality.

On April 15, 1836 James Mason’s brother Paris, and James Mason’s widow, Mrs. Sarah Mason assumed responsibility for surveying, platting and selling lots and incorporating the town. Mrs. Mason named the settlement Grafton in honor of her husband’s birthplace. Paris Mason took charge of the Mason enterprises in Grafton until 1840. James and Sarah Mason’s daughter married William H. Allen and he eventually took over and expanded the Mason interests. His activities included mercantile, produce, flour mills and banking. Allen participated in the Illinois Constitutional Convention in 1860 and served as 6th District State Senator in 1871.

12. THE GROVE MEMORIAL PARK
The first settlers almost always located their homes near rivers and in wooded hollows. They were predominantly experienced woodsmen and found the forest provided abundant material to construct homes, manufacture tools and build furniture. In addition, there was convenient access to the firewood needed for cooking, heating, and for the ashes used to make soap and tan hides.

Two of these hollows lead from The Grove Memorial Park. Jersey Hollow is on your right (present Hwy. #3) and Distillery Hollow is on your left. As per its name, Distillery Hollow was the location of the