

Auburn City Hardware

Founded: [1850–59]

Location: Corner of Main and Eighth Streets (1850–); 203 South Main Street (1993)

As early as 1859, Joseph D. Davis was operating a hardware store in Auburn. Davis was a De Kalb County pioneer, and although it is unclear when he first settled in the area and started a hardware store, he seems to have been a hatter early on. By 1859 he was a manufacturer of tinware as well. Joseph's brothers, William and Lewis, ran a hardware store in Wabash in the 1850s. A third brother, John Davis, joined William and Lewis in Wabash in the spring of 1853 and learned the tinner's trade. John was born near Buffalo, New York, and returned there after only one year in Indiana. He married and became a farmer, but in October 1862 he returned to Indiana and settled in Auburn. Joseph's health was failing, and he intended that John should assume control of the Pioneer Hardware Store. Joseph died in April 1865, and John purchased the store for \$2000.

John Davis continued to operate the Pioneer Hardware Store for thirty-five years. The store, which was located at the corner of Main and Eighth Streets, burned down only two or three years after John Davis assumed ownership. Davis erected a new building, which came to be known as the Davis Building, on the same location. Davis's business prospered, and he became a leading promoter of Auburn and the neighboring town of Garrett, which grew up on the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad only four miles west of Auburn. In 1873 and 1874 Davis donated time and money for the construction of the Detroit, Eel River, & Illinois and the Baltimore & Ohio Railroads. He also contributed

money to establish factories and other enterprises. Between 1875 and 1885 Davis purchased real estate in Garrett, built commercial buildings, and started the city's first hardware store. He ran a private banking company in both Auburn and Garrett. The hardware store, in addition to doubling as a bank, was also at one time the location of an early telephone exchange. The prosperous Davis was elected to a term as county treasurer in 1884. His fortunes changed, however. In 1892 Davis's only surviving son, Fred, who had assisted him as deputy county treasurer and been bookkeeper in his store, died. The next year Davis suffered severe losses, including, it seems, the temporary loss of his store in the panic of 1893. Davis reestablished his hardware business but became ill in late 1899 and died the following year.

In 1900 John H. Leasure returned to Auburn and entered the hardware business. Leasure had been born in Ohio in 1849, but his family moved to Auburn in 1852. He apprenticed as a shoemaker and then clerked in a hardware store. In 1880 he married Lida Powers, a high school teacher. Their marriage was unusual in that Lida returned to teaching in 1882. She then went on to earn a medical degree from the University of Michigan and practiced medicine in Angola and Logansport. After establishing himself in the hardware business in Auburn in 1900, John Leasure organized the Auburn Hardware Company with W. H. McQuiston and Harry Swarts. The men purchased John Davis's old store from his estate and ran it for two years. Leasure's entire family returned to Auburn in 1903. Leasure, his wife, and his son bought out McQuiston and Swarts and became sole owners of the hardware store. Lida returned to teaching and became the county superintendent of schools in 1911, becoming possibly the first woman

elected to public office in the state. The hardware store remained a prosperous Auburn institution, carrying assorted lines of hardware, including paints and stoves.

In 1915 Elmer Frederick purchased the hardware store, which had come to be known as Auburn Hardware. In 1939 E. L. Kokenge purchased it and renamed it Auburn City Hardware. He died in 1979 after forty years as owner and was succeeded by Robert E. Kokenge, who had joined the company in 1954. In 1982 Robert A. Kokenge joined the family business.