

Now & Then in Ripon ... Looking back with the Ripon Historical Society

The hidden history above Watson Street

By Pat Grahm

Editor's note: This is the fifth in a series of articles about the Watson Street commercial district which runs from the 100 to 300 blocks of Ripon's downtown.

The Watson Street Commercial Historic District is comprised of most of the buildings on the three blocks of modern-day Watson Street and some buildings on the streets next to it. The district was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1991.

While people often think of the retail stores and banks that were found along Watson Street, they may not know that many businesses also were located on the upper stories of these buildings.

When the Watson Street commercial buildings were built, the upper stories were occupied by doctor and dentist offices, attorneys, insurance agencies, manufacturing companies and other various types of businesses, as well as fraternal organizations.

Perhaps one of the best remembered of the upper story businesses is Lockwood's Temple of Photography. Its location is well documented in historical photographs, which show the studio's name arched above the second story windows. The studio was located on the second floor of 123 Watson St. from approximately 1875 when the building was built until sometime in the 1890s. A photo after the building was remodeled in 1909 shows a dentist occupying the second story.

Ripon Knitting Works, a company producing socks and mittens, as well as other items, started in 1880 on the second floor covering the four addresses from 227 to 233 Watson St. The building moved to a new three-story factory around 1900, which was located at the southwest end of Watson Street where Ripon Drug is located today.

The community's current day newspaper, the *Ripon Commonwealth Press*, was founded in 1865 and occupied several locations above the retail stores

of Watson Street. At one time, the paper was located above the former Mattice-Foster department store (now the Campus Theatre) at 101 Watson St. It then moved to another second story location until that building burned in 1904. Its third move to a second-story location was above a meat market at 211 Watson St., the current location of Gents. Later, it moved to the first floor of a West Fond du Lac Street building now occupied by Fox River Glove.

A fraternal organization, the Odd Fellows, was chartered in Ripon in 1869. The organization met on the second story of various Watson Street buildings. In the later 1800s, it moved above the Barlow & Seelig hardware store at 214 Watson St. In 1920, it purchased the building across the street from the 100 block of Watson Street at 102 W. Jackson St., the present-day location of Traded Treasures & Community Food Pantry. For approximately 67 years, the organization utilized the upper stories of the building for meetings, dances and social activities while renting out the first-floor retail space.

The 1904 Strauss Brothers Store building at the south end of the 230 Watson St. building offered office spaces for rent on its second floor. The northern half of the building housed a different retailer and the second floor was rented to a dressmaker. This building now is home to Knuth Brewing Co., which uses the second floor as an event space.

The 1880 Ripon City Hall and Fire Department building at 125 Watson St. was utilized as a municipal building until 1965, when it was razed. It featured the city post office and retail stores on the first floor. The municipal offices and a courtroom were located on the second floor, as well as a community meeting space.

The Spot restaurant, which occupied 305 Watson St. from 1950 until 1990, featured roller skating on its second level for a period of time.

By the middle of the 20th century, when most people had a car, downtown Ripon experienced a drain of shoppers.



THIS PHOTO OF the east side of the 100 block of Watson Street shows the 123 Watson St. building on the lower right side after it was remodeled in 1909. The second story, which used to house Lockwood's Temple of Photography, now shows a dentist occupying the space. It was common from the mid-19th to the mid-20th century for dentists and doctors to have offices on an upper story of a Watson Street building.

submitted photo

Businesses such as automobile dealerships, grocery and department stores, along with cafes and fast-food restaurants all relocated to the highways along the main entrances to the city.

These outlying areas had more space for business expansion and parking for automobiles. Cars also provided easier access to larger shopping areas in nearby Fond du Lac or Oshkosh.

Insurance agencies and offices that occupied the upper stories of downtown Watson Street could now move to the first-floor level, giving the business more exposure and easier access for their clients.

Doctors no longer made house calls and instead patients came to see them. This caused a shift to medical offices with easier first floor access and parking for cars.

Today, some Watson Street businesses such as Farrell's Fine Furniture, 214 Watson St., and Roadhouse Pizza, 102 Watson St., still utilize their upper stories. However, the majority of the upper stories of the Watson Street commercial buildings have been converted into apartments for residential living.



FROM THE TIME that the Watson Street commercial buildings were built until the second half of the 20th century, the upper floors were occupied by various businesses. One of the best remembered was Lockwood's Temple of Photography on the second story of 123 Watson St. This photography studio was one of the best known in the region and its location is well documented in historical photographs.

submitted photo

The Ripon Historical Society is the oldest continually operating historical society in Wisconsin. It is open Fridays and Saturdays 10 a.m. to 1 p.m.

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