

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

Starr family owned eastern side of 700 Lincoln Street

Two residents who live on the eastern side of the 700 block of Lincoln Street recently requested information about their houses from the Ripon Historical Society.

This area lays just outside of the Southwest Historic District, which is listed on the National Register of Historic Places, but the Ripon Historical Society was able to find information about the homes in question.

Early Days

To explain why the historical society might not have much information on the 700 block of Lincoln Street, one has to look at early plat maps of Ripon.

These maps show that the land where the eastern side of the 700 block of Lincoln Street is located originally had been purchased by William J. Starr (1821-1879).

Starr owned a large square of land between Woodside Avenue and Lincoln Street bordered by Howard Street. South Grove Street had not yet extended through this land, and the Starr family home was located on Woodside Avenue just north of the former Roosevelt School building.

At that time, land at the edge of the community of Ripon was considered the country.

By 1910, some houses and subdivisions were springing up to the southeast of this area, but many of the houses directly south of 700 Lincoln St. were still farm houses or standing on large parcels of land like the Starr family's home. All have been incorporated into city limits and had more modern houses built around them. In fact, nearby Barlow Park was then a horse racing track just beyond some of the housing.

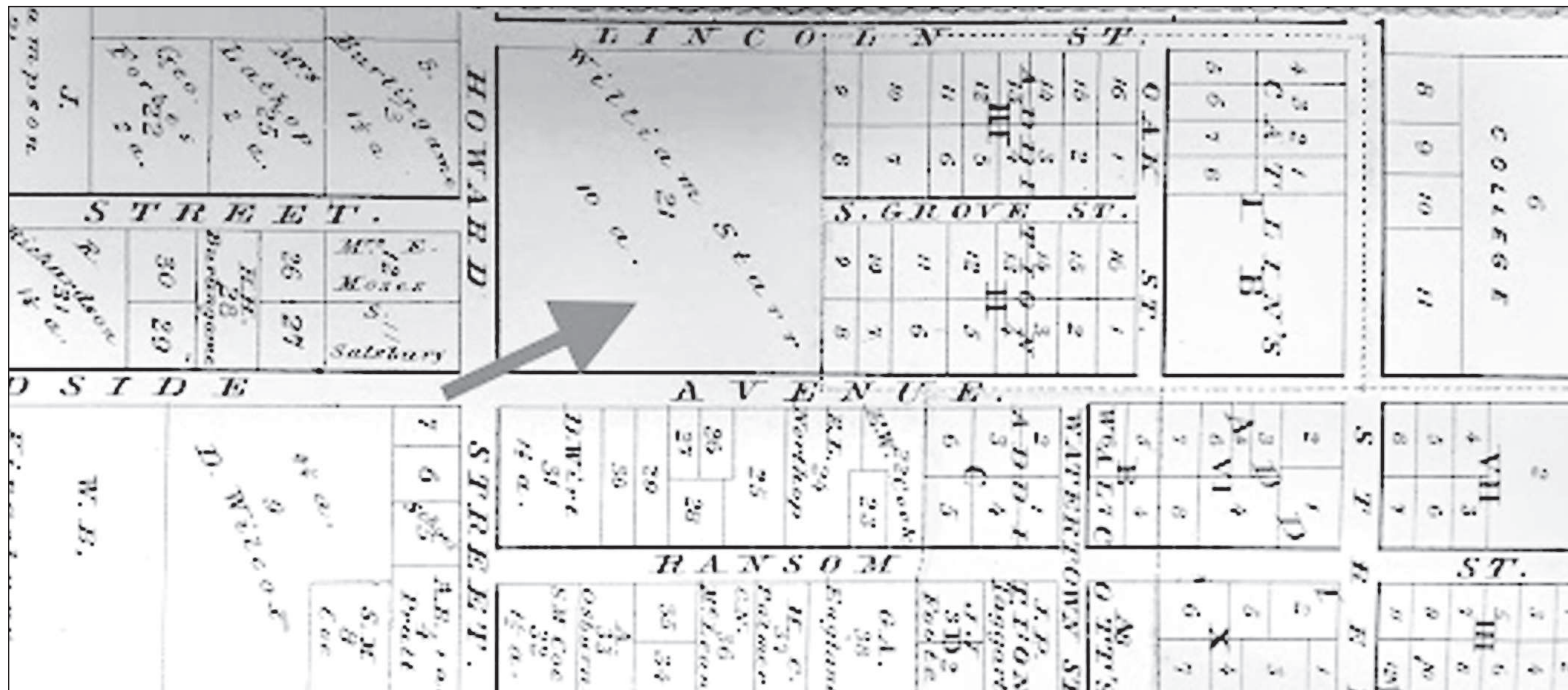
About William J. Starr and the Starr Family

Starr, who was a descendent of Harvard College founder Dr. Comfort Starr (1589-1659), came to Wisconsin in 1843.

In 1845, he moved to join the Wisconsin Phalanx in Ceresco settlement group, which now is a part of Ripon (Ceresco Park off Union Street is now located in this original Phalanx area).

Starr was a school teacher and briefly opened a school in Ceresco, but then started a mercantile business and also entered into the lumber business. Starr then was elected chairman of the town board in 1849 and 1850, and was the second postmaster. He also was the second clerk of the town from 1847 until 1848, and was one of the original founders of Ripon College and a trustee.

In 1859, he was one of a committee of Ripon residents appoint-



THE STARR PROPERTY, which ran along Woodside Avenue, bordered Lincoln and Howard streets, as seen in early Fond du Lac County Plat Books. *submitted photo*

ed to canvass Fond du Lac County for a referendum to separate Ripon from Fond du Lac County and attach Ripon to Green Lake County.

The referendum appeared to pass at first, but it was invalidated by the Wisconsin Supreme Court due to election irregularities.

In addition to this, Starr was a staunch abolitionist. During what was called Ripon's 1860 Booth War, Starr was placed under house arrest by U.S. Marshalls. This was due to the fact that he was speaking out for — and protecting — Sherman Booth (1812-1904) after Booth was imprisoned for violating the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, broke out of jail and was brought to Ripon.

Later, in 1862, Starr was elected to the Wisconsin State Assembly for two terms. In 1864, he was appointed to the Board of Regents for the Wisconsin State Normal Schools and served on this board until his death. Starr became president of this board in 1868.

In 1857, Starr married Phebe Ann (Annie) Strong Clark (1824-1904). Annie came to Ceresco with her parents in 1844. Her father, Nathan Strong (1813-1852), left the Ceresco area and founded nearby Berlin in 1847.

Annie originally married Temple Clark in 1847, but divorced him before remarrying Starr. Divorce was unusual at this time, but unlike the rest of the country, it was acceptable in the Wisconsin Phalanx community of Ceresco.

Upon Annie's death, she donated 9.5 acres of wooded land adjacent to South Woods to the city of Ripon. This land, now known as Annie Starr Woods, is now administered by the South Woods Park Association.

The Starrs had one son, William James Starr (1862-1921),

who eventually inherited the family's land holdings.

This younger William Starr moved from Ripon to Eau Claire as a youth and lived with a guardian. He went on to own the Davis and Starr Lumber Co. of Eau Claire, along with other businesses in that area of Wisconsin.

He also had business interests in Louisiana and California and made a fortune in timber. Like his father, the younger Starr also became a Ripon College trustee.

In addition to their family home, the Starrs also owned a cottage called "The Boulders" on Illinois Avenue in Green Lake.

In 1906, the younger Starr, his wife Ida May Hill Starr (1859-1938) and their children moved to a former plantation which they called "Hope House" near Easton, Md. Being influenced by his father's thinking, the younger Starr supported civil rights for African Americans. The Starrs became well-connected with Black artists and performers and often entertained Black guests as well as prestigious visitors such as President Woodrow Wilson.

The Starrs also brought their Black friends to a nearby country club. One of their daughters, Ruth Starr Rose (1887-1965) was an internationally known painter and lithographer and was best-known for her paintings of African-American life in Maryland in the 1930s and 1940s.

She is credited as the first white artist to create a work of art for a Black church.

A son, William James Starr Jr., graduated from Ripon College in 1908.

"I recall that while he was a student here, he became a member of a club of students — who lived in the original house that had been used by his grandfather for a residence on Woodside Avenue," Ripon historian Sam Pedrick (1868-1963) wrote. "William Jr. lived [there] until his father died and the home was then used by renters until demolished and a new building was erected on the site, which was north of the former Roosevelt High School building."

Starr family land holdings

A 1930s map of Ripon shows South Grove Street being ex-



THIS IMAGE OF William Starr (1821-1879) is shared from the 1880 book, "The History of Fond du Lac County Wisconsin." Starr came to the Ripon area in 1845. A well-known politician and businessman, he also owned a home on Woodside Avenue, which no longer stands today. *submitted photo*

tended through what once was the Starr family land. We can assume that the land owned by the Starrs was sold sometime after William Starr's son passed away in 1921. This would mean that the eastern side of the 700 block of Lincoln was not developed until this time, dating most of the houses post-1920 with many being built in the 1930s.

When requested, the Ripon Historical Society will search its archives for house histories.

At the same time, the society

requests home owners share any information they may have about their house, who built or lived there, the year it was built and any other details they might know or have found.

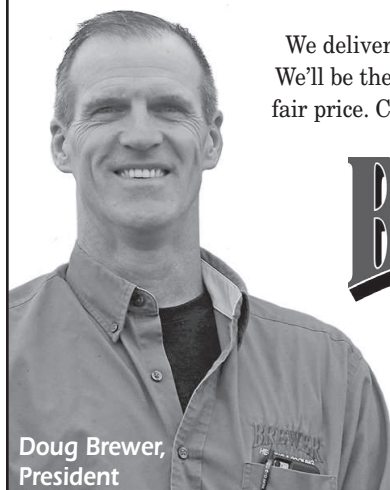
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