

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

Why Ripon's main street is called 'Watson Street'

By Pat Grahn

Editor's note: This is a first in a series about Ripon's historic shopping area which is found between the 100 and 300 blocks of Watson Street.

When walking down Watson Street people might wonder why the street is not called "Main Street."

Many of the first streets in Ripon were named by John Scott Horner (1802-1883), who was one of the original founders of the city of Ripon and Ripon College. Horner named Ripon after his ancestral home of Ripon, England and Watson Street for his wife Harriet Love Watson Horner (1805-1883).

In 1835, President Andrew Jackson (1767-1845) appointed Horner as territorial governor of the Michigan Territory which included Wisconsin.

Horner then served as secretary of the Wisconsin Territory from 1836-1837. He went onto become the registrar of the Green Bay Land Office. He purchased a quarter section of land that became the city of Ripon.

In the late 1830s, David Mapes (1798-1890) came to Wisconsin from New York hoping to find an area that had economic development potential.

The Ripon Historical Society website notes that Mapes made a deal with Horner in 1849. The website explains "Mapes was the primary promoter and 'wheeler and dealer' in starting what would become Ripon. Mapes was required to plat the village and in return he would receive every other lot for development. He was also required to build a hotel and run it for one year, as well as build a grist mill while Horner retained naming right for the village and major streets."

Watson Street once was a dirt street which included hitching posts for horses and wooden sidewalks.

In the 1964 book, "A History of Ripon," local historian Sam Pedrick (1868-1963) noted that in the later 1800s that gravel was placed on the street, but it did little to help the condition. He stated that in the 1870s the commercial district "was a sea of liquid mud."

In the spring of 1901, a foundation of gravel topped with paving bricks was laid on the 100 to 300 blocks of Watson Street, making it the first paved street in Ripon. In 1979, the original paving



THIS PAINTING OF Harriet Love Watson Horner is found in the Ripon Historical Society's Pedrick-Lawson House. Watson Street was named after Harriet Love Watson Horner by her husband, John Scott Horner, who was one of the original founders of the city of Ripon. *submitted photo*

bricks were torn up and removed when the city repaved Watson Street with asphalt. Many of these bricks can be found around the community of Ripon as garden edging, driveways, sidewalks and decks.

Most of the buildings on modern day Watson Street and some buildings on the streets immediately next to it are in the Watson Street Commercial Historic District and were placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1991.

Managed by the National Park Service, the National Register of Historic Places is the official federal list of districts, buildings, structures and objects which are deemed worthy of preservation for their historical, architectural or archaeological significance.

To be placed on the National Register of Historic Places as a contributing building in a historic district, buildings must be 50 years old, retain significant physical integrity from the district's period of significance and embody the district's historic, architectural or cultural importance, as well as being contiguous with other buildings in the district.

The national register paperwork for the Watson Street Commercial Historic District informs that the first stores were opened on Watson Street in 1849 and 1850. Regarding the current buildings in the district, it notes, "Of the 69



RIPON'S HISTORIC COMMERCIAL district and main street is located between the 100 to 300 blocks of Watson Street. Community gatherings, concerts and celebrations were held on Watson Street as shown in this Fourth of July celebration from 1908. The current day Mapes Hotel, 300 Watson St., is seen on the left-hand side of this photo which was looking north. In 1901, Watson Street became the first paved street in Ripon. *submitted photo*

buildings in the district that qualify for the National Register of Historic Places only 4 or 6% date to the 1860s, while 28 or 39% and 8 or 11% of the contributing buildings in the district were built during the 1870s or 1880s."

It continues, "The dates of construction of the buildings in the district reflect the reconstruction of the downtown after disastrous fires in 1868 and 1869 and smaller fires that destroyed a number of important commercial blocks, during the 1870s and 1880s."

The city of Ripon Historic Preservation Commission oversees the Watson Street Commercial Historic District, and this district contains the only historic properties besides the Ceresco site near Ceresco Park that is protected by city ordinance.

The National Register of Historic Places lacks the legal authority to prevent private owners from altering or demolishing their designated building. Protecting national register buildings falls to the city, and ordinances protecting these buildings provides the only enforceable legal framework to prevent damage or demolishing these national treasures.

Income-producing buildings listed on the National Register of Historic Places that are being renovated within the Watson Street Commercial Historic District qualify for a 20% state tax credit, which can be combined with

a 20% federal tax credit. A \$500 city grant for buildings in the Watson Street Commercial Historic District also exist.

City design guidelines for the Watson Street Commercial Historic District are in place, and the city Historic Preservation Commission must approve any work to the exterior of the buildings including signage.

In 1988, Ripon joined the Main Street Program and was one of Wisconsin's earliest Main Street communities. Started in 1980 by the National Trust for Historic Preservation, the Main Street Program helps to revitalize older and historic downtowns and neighborhood commercial districts. The program is focused on preservation-based economic development.

Over the past 38 years, the Ripon Main Street Program has been involved in the revitalization of Watson Street. This has included helping private entities in the restoration of buildings, improving street scape, and promotional activities such as the summer concert series, wine walks and more.

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.

For more information, visit www.riponhistory.org, facebook.com/riponhistoricalsociety or instagram.com/riponhistoricalsociety/.



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