

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

America at 250: Ripon's historic places preserve the past

By Pat Grahn

In honor of America's 250th birthday, this Now & Then in Ripon looks at the buildings in Ripon that are listed on the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP).

The National Park Service explains that "The National Register of Historic Places is the official list of the nation's historic places worthy of preservation. Authorized by the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, the National Park Service's National Register of Historic Places is part of a national program to coordinate and support public and private efforts to identify, evaluate and protect America's historic and archeological resources."

There also is a Wisconsin State Register of Historic Places, which is an official list of state properties that are historically significant to Wisconsin's heritage. Buildings on the NRHP also are listed on the state register.

More than 2,500 sites in Wisconsin are listed on the NRHP. In Fond du Lac County, 53 properties and historic districts are listed on the National Register.

To obtain a national registration designation, a comprehensive nomination packet is completed, presented to and managed through a state historical societies historic preservation office. Once approved on a state level, the national register application is sent to the National Park Service.

To obtain a successful nomination, all information presented must be backed by various forms of evidence — including a comprehensive history, maps, documents, photographs and more. An individual could fill out the nomination paperwork, however, in most cases a professional historian is hired to do this work.

Eight individual buildings in Ripon are listed on the NRHP. To qualify to be placed on the national register, buildings must be at least 50 years old, look much like it did in the past and represent a significant part of history or architecture.

The individual national register buildings found in Ripon include the Baptist church listed in 2007 and found at 133 E. Fond du Lac St. It was built in 1857 and currently is the home of the American Legion. The congregational church was listed in 1979 and built between 1865 and 1868 at 220 Ransom St. The John Scott Horner house was built in 1860, listed in 1984 and is located at 336 Scott St.

Listed in 1997, the Longfellow School was built between 1927 and 1928 is located at 221 Spaulding Ave. The Marcus Pedrick House at 515 Ransom Ave. was built in 1858 and listed on the register in 1976. St. Peter's Episcopal Church at 217 Houston St. was built in 1860 and listed on the register in 1974.

Found at 610 Liberty St., the 1850 Jacob Woodruff House is the only remaining octagon shaped building in Ripon and was listed in 1974.

The Little White Schoolhouse, 1074 W. Fond du Lac St., has been moved several times. It was built in 1854 and was first listed on the national register in



THIS UNDATED PHOTO shows the 500 and 400 blocks of Watson Street looking north to the 300 to 100 blocks which is Ripon's commercial district. Both areas are located in historic districts. The two districts feature 220 buildings that are listed on the National Register of Historic Places. *submitted photo* 1973, removed from the register in 2023 and relisted in 2024.

Four historic districts exist in Ripon and one site is listed on the NRHP. To be placed on the NRHP 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.

Buildings within a district which fit the correct criteria are listed on the NRHP and called "contributing buildings." Buildings that do not fit into the parameters of a historic building and do not fit the criteria are noted to be "non-contributing."

The Watson Street Commercial Historic District was placed onto the NRHP in 1991. Sixty-nine buildings were considered contributing and 14 non-contributing buildings within this district.

The Ripon College Historic District was listed in 1995 and is comprised of 12 buildings.

The Ceresco Site, listed in 1975, located near Ceresco Park off Union Street, was the 1844 site of an agricultural commune based on Fourierist ideals and the first development in Ripon.

Two residential historic districts exist in Ripon. The Southwest Historic District was listed in 2004 and covers parts of Grove, Lincoln, Newbury, Oak, Ransom, West Sullivan, Thorne, Wattertown, Watson streets and Woodside Avenue. The oldest home in the district is from 1853. The district is made up of 161 contributing and 27 noncontributing buildings.

The Tygert Street Historic District, a residential district listed in 2011, is found between Tygert Street and Spaulding Avenue bounded by Scott Street and East Lane Street. Seventy contributing buildings are on the register and nine buildings are noncontributing buildings.

The NRHP lacks the legal authority to prevent private owners from altering or demolishing their designated building. Protecting national register buildings falls to the city, and local ordinances

protecting these buildings provides the only enforceable legal framework to prevent damage or demolishing these national treasures.

With the individual building listings and buildings within districts, 320 buildings are on the NRHP in Ripon. Except for the 70 buildings within the Watson Street Commercial Historic District and the Ceresco Site, no other national register listings in Ripon are protected by city ordinance. This leaves 250 national register buildings unprotected.

This lack of city ordinance protection for its national register buildings became an issue when the Little White Schoolhouse was moved in April 2023 without permission from the National Park Service and the Wisconsin Historical Society. Because of this, the Little White Schoolhouse, which also has National Historic Landmark status, was removed from the NRHP.

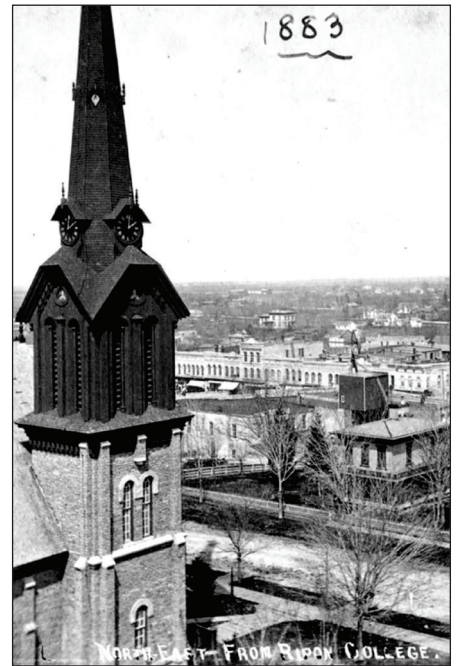
After the de-listing, new applications for national register designation had to be submitted to state and national registries by its owner, the Ripon Chamber of Commerce. It was relisted in July 2024. This could have been avoided by protecting buildings on the NRHP in Ripon located beyond the Watson Street Commercial Historic District with a city ordinance.

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

On the city of Ripon website under the Historic Preservation Commission tab, it lists some structures in the city that "have been designated by the Historic Preservation Commission as being locally significant."

The website states that "Should any building applications be made for the designated structures, the Historic Preservation Commission would be notified and could help with any design alterations, tax credit information or material recommendation for the project."

The city list of historic structures



THE FIRST CONGREGATIONAL Church of Ripon, 220 Ransom Street was built between 1865 and 1868 and was listed on the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP) in 1979. This 1883 photo shows the church which sits on a hill looking east to the Watson Street Commercial Historic District, which was placed onto the NRHP in 1991. *submitted photo*

mentions only six national register buildings and the Ripon College Historic District. It does not list two of Ripon's individual national register buildings: the former Baptist church (now the American Legion Hall) at 133 E. Fond du Lac St. and the former Longfellow School at 221 Spaulding Ave. The list also does not mention the Southwest Historic District or the Tygert Street Historic District, which include 231 buildings on the national register.

Income-producing buildings that are being renovated within the Watson Street Commercial Historic District and other income-producing NRHP buildings 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 is available.

Homeowners with a national register house within one of the two residential districts qualify for 25% state tax credits. The state residential tax credits cover work such as painting, roofs, new HVAC systems, water heaters and more. The minimum amount of work covered for the tax credit program is \$10,000 giving the homeowner a state tax credit of \$1,500.

The tax credit program is managed by the Wisconsin Historical Society and the Wisconsin Economic Development Corp. The work being done on a building needs to be pre-approved to qualify for the credits.

The Ripon Historical Society is the oldest continually operating historical society in Wisconsin. For more information, visit www.riponhistory.org, facebook.com/riponhistoricalsociety or instagram.com/riponhistoricalsociety/.