

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

Three buildings could join Watson Street's Historic District

By Pat Grahm

Editor's note: This is the sixth and final story in a series of articles about the Watson Street commercial district. This article discusses the more recent buildings found within the Watson Street Commercial Historic District. These are not currently listed on the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP) but could potentially be added.

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 onto the NRHP in 1991. There were 69 buildings which were considered contributing to the district (qualified to be placed on the NRHP) and 14 non-contributing buildings (not qualified to be placed 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.

Some of the non-contributing buildings in the district were sheds found behind buildings on Watson Street which no longer exist. Others had lost too much of their historic appearance to qualify for the NRHP.

Three buildings found on or near Watson Street did not qualify as a contributing building due to their age in 1991, when the NRHP paperwork was submitted. These buildings now of the correct age and are potentially significant enough to contribute to and be added into the Watson Street Commercial Historic District and



THE HORICON BANK building at 400 Watson St. was constructed in 1975. Of modernist architecture, this building was presented with a "Distinguished Building Award" by the Chicago Chapter of The American Institute of Architects. The 51-year-old building is located at the end of the Watson Street Commercial Historic District and might qualify to be added to the National Register of Historic Places.

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therefore onto the NRHP.

The buildings that might now qualify to be contributing include the 61-year-old Ripon City Hall, 100 E. Jackson. Built in 1965, the City Hall is located on the north end of the Watson Street Commercial Historic District. The building occupies a prominent spot facing south overlooking the historic city square in the 100 block of Watson Street.

It is also located one door east of 102 W. Jackson St., an 1870s building which is included in the historic district and is listed on the NRHP. Being located across the street from the 100 block of Watson Street and next door to a contributing building already included in the district makes City Hall a contiguous building.

Ripon's first City Hall was built in 1885 on a triangular lot at the intersection of Watson, Scott and West

Fond du Lac streets after a fire that year destroyed another building in that location. It was a multipurpose municipal building, also housing the fire department and the local post office.

By the early 1960s, the almost 80-year-old building no longer fit the needs of the community which had grown from 3,739 to 6,600 residents. Larger, more modern, firetrucks barely fit into the fire department's garage space. The city began looking for a site for a new municipal building.

The five-story Grand View Hotel had been built on a hill at the end of Watson Street in 1872. It had 75 rooms and was considered one of the most elegant hotels in the area. The hotel was destroyed by a fire in 1949, which killed six people. The land that the hotel occupied sat empty for 16 years and provided a large space in the downtown area for a modern municipal building, which was built in 1965.

The municipal offices and meetings spaces share an entrance off the first story of the building on Jackson Street with the Ripon Police Department. The fire department was housed on the bottom of the hill on the lower level of the building with an entrance off of Jefferson Street.

The fire department has since moved to a new facility, but their former space is now occupied by the local emergency medical services. Over the years, City Hall also has housed the Ripon Senior Center and it has been used as the communities polling location.

The former City Hall building at 125 Watson St. was razed in 1965 and a new building was built in 1968 as the home for a bank. The building now is 58 years old, is located within the Watson Street Commercial Historic District and could be considered as contributing to the district and qualify for the NRHP.

The triangular building was oc-

cupied by several banks until 1995, when the National Forensics League (NFL) then occupied the space. After the NFL moved out of state, the building remained unoccupied until it was renovated in 2020 and became a retail store.

Still found in the sub-basement of the modern 125 Watson St. building are two barrel-vaulted water reservoirs built in 1885 under the fire department. These reservoirs provided water for any fires around Watson Street. But they were never used as fire hydrants were placed throughout the city in 1890.

The third building which potentially could be added to the district is the Horicon Bank building at 400 Watson St. The building was constructed in 1975 as the First National Bank of Ripon. This building was presented with a "Distinguished Building Award" by the Chicago Chapter of The American Institute of Architects.

The bank's exterior has been changed from when it was built, and this might be a consideration in qualifying for the NRHP. The bank was first built with dual-pane glass walls, which today have been covered with removable insulation panels.

The building sits across the street from the former Ripon Public Library site, which was built in 1905 at 401 Watson St., is included in the Watson Street Commercial Historic District and is listed on the NRHP. Due to this, it could be argued that the Horicon Bank building is contiguous with the historic district.

In a commercial district of mostly 18th- and 19th-century buildings, it can be considered by some to be a refreshing break that the north and south ends, as well as the middle of the historic district, feature buildings of more modernistic architecture. This reflects on the change and growth of the community over the years and speaks to a progressive thought process.

The city of Ripon Historic Preservation Commission oversees the Watson Street Historic District. This district contains the only buildings in Ripon listed on the NRHP that are protected by city ordinance and have design guidelines. If added to the NRHP, these three Ripon properties would be recognized on a state and national level and would be potentially protected for future generations.

The Historic Preservation Commission could choose to hire a professional historian to review the three buildings and, if they qualify, complete the paperwork to add them to the historic district.

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/.



THE FORMER CITY hall location at 125 Watson St. was razed in 1965 and a new building built in 1968 as the home to a bank. The building is now 58 years old, is located within the Watson Street Commercial Historic District and could be considered as contributing to the district and qualify for the National Register of Historic Places.

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