

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

How the 300 block completed downtown Ripon

By Pat Grahm

Editor's note: This is the fourth 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 three blocks of Watson Street and some buildings on the streets immediately next to it. The district was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1991. Not much construction on Watson Street took place after 1890 except for in the 300 block.

National register paperwork states that the 300 block of Watson Street, "Grew as a gradual and logical extension of the downtown business district around the turn of the [20th] century. In fact, the 1884 Sanborn-Perris map shows that this block was largely undeveloped on both sides of the street. There were only a few brick or stone commercial buildings interspersed between vacant lots and small frame commercial buildings or residences."

At the southeast corner of Blossom Street, Ripon State Bank built a grey limestone Neo-Classical Revival building at 301 Watson St. in 1913, the same year it was founded. One of four banks in Ripon at the time, the bank's history included a major robbery in 1936, a fire in 1945, an addition in 1954 and in 1967 one of the first banks in Ripon to have a drive through and a walk-up window, which was located on the back of the building.

Ripon State Bank was sold to M&I



NOT MUCH CONSTRUCTION took place on Watson Street after 1890 except for in the 300 block. This photograph shows the Neo-Classical Revival Ripon State Bank at 301 Watson St. being built in 1913 at the southeast corner of Blossom Street. Its history included a major robbery in 1936, a fire in 1945, an addition in 1954 and in 1967 one of the first banks to have a drive through window.

submitted photo

Bank in the 1970s and around 1981 relocated to 333 Blackburn St. The Watson Street building was given to the city, which used it for the Ripon Senior Center and other civic offices. Today, it is occupied by several businesses.

One of the oldest buildings on the east side of the 300 block is 305 Watson St., which was built in 1869 right after a fire in 1868 destroyed this side of the street. It was built to house a furniture and undertaking business that dated back to 1856. The location housed a

funeral business for 57 years, which eventually became Butzin-Marchant Funeral Home and still is found in Ripon.

The building is best known in recent history as the home to The Spot Restaurant and Supper Club, founded in 1950 and sold in 1990. This business is so ingrained in the recent history of the community that Ripon College named a dining and hang-out space after the business and replicated their original sign. The building is now the location of a retail store called American Alchemy.

The large building at 323 Watson St. originally was constructed around 1898 for Company D, Second Regiment of the Wisconsin National Guard around the time of the Spanish-American War. The current building's red-brick façade probably was constructed for the Ripon Motor Co. around 1920. The building was a car dealership until the mid-20th century and then housed several stores, including Gables' Hardware Store, Sears and more recently Bluemke's. Today, it houses Déjà vu Boutique and Home LLC.

The 1925 building at 333 Watson St. was home to the Biegick Brothers Garage. Biegick's was a gas station, sold tires and offered car service, having garage doors facing Seward Street. These doors have been replaced with glass windows, and the building now houses J's BBQ.

The northwest side of the 300 block of Watson Street has been anchored by the Mapes Hotel since 1853. This is the oldest remaining building in downtown Ripon. It once had a fourth floor, however this was removed after flames from a nearby fire damaged the roof and floor.

The Mapes Hotel had several names over the years. The building sat empty from 2008 until 2018, when renovations began to make it a boutique hotel. In 2020, which is the year it reopened, the hotel won the Best Historic Restoration Award at the 30th-annual Wisconsin Main Street Awards.

The red-brick building to the south of the Mapes Hotel at 302 Watson St. originally was numbered 308 Watson St. This started out as a cream-colored brick building and it is not clear if the owner of the building remodeled a late 1800s building which sat in the location or if a new building was built in 1904.

The address has housed a meat market, grocery store, shoe store, dry cleaning shop, tailoring business, billiard hall and an appliance store. Many people in Ripon remember the building as home to Arthur's Men's Clothing Shop which operated from the early 1950s until the late 1970s. After Arthur's closed a well-known photography studio, the Bock Studio, took over the space. The building was renovated at the same time as the Mapes Hotel and until recently housed the Fox and Crow Bistro.

Today, Ripon Drug occupies 328 Watson St. at the northwest corner of Watson and Seward streets. However, this once was the location of one of Ripon's earliest and most prominent manufacturing companies. Ripon Knitting Works was founded in 1880 and over the years produced heavy hosiery, military socks, leather baseball gloves, mittens, and in the 1940's became the nation's largest producer of slipper socks.

The company first occupied the second floor of 227-233 Watson St. In approximately 1900, it moved to a three-story cream brick factory which loomed over the south end of the 300 block of Watson Street. The company closed in the late 1960s and the building was razed to make way for Ripon Drug.

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 THREE-STORY RIPON Knitting Works factory, left, once occupied the southwestern end of the 300 block of Watson Street. The Biegick Brothers Garage, built in 1925, can be seen on the lower right-hand side of this undated photo.

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