

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

Ripon Library Association members paved the way

This article is the third in a series of Ripon clubs and organizations that, through their work and deeds, made an impact on our community's culture. Their organizational visions and missions were drafted as "charters," outlining their core values and setting them in action to achieve objectives. Between 1865 and 1965, Ripon had 41 registered clubs and organizations.

When local Ripon ladies stated they would create and maintain a library for public use in 1885, they formed "The Ripon Library Association" as a privately funded organization.

The association originally had 12 members who divided themselves into three groups of four. Each group was given a position to occupy and hold while carrying out duties including president to director officer's roles. Their three- to four-year tenures provided continuity and stability for members of the organization to make progress.

The first association meeting was at the home of Nellie E. Skeels (1857-1937) on Jan. 3, 1885 at 7 p.m. via invitation.

Association members drafted their constitution and articles of incorporation, notarized by Ripon attorney Edmond L. Runals (1826-1888). This constitution was then submitted to and accepted by the Wisconsin secretary of state.

Determination drives success

Donations of money were led by The Ripon Library Association members.

At first, fundraising was brisk and monies were collected. Unfortunately, the total amount of money raised was not enough to immediately build a physical library building. This caused library books to be housed at downtown Ripon stores for public access.

The first library books' location was Wakefield's Drug Store



EARLY RIPON LIBRARY Association members circa late 1880s are, front row, from left, F.M. Erickson, Mary A. Gillet; second row, Florence Mason, Clara E. Barnett, Minnie G. McLeod, Elizabeth Ellsworth, Nellie Skeels Brayton; back row, Mary Cowan, Josephine D. Davy, Mary Cody, Mary Chittenden and Bertha Eversz, submitted photo

(address unknown). The books then moved to Schallern's Drug Store (address unknown) before eventually moving to Brayton's Drug Store (123 Watson St., now Soul Patina Home Décor & Gift Boutique) and finally to Edward Ensign's Jewelry Store (210 Watson St., now Dear Prudence Women's Boutique Apparel).

Starting with only 500 books, the library escalated to 1,435 books due to the association's goal of acquiring approximately 100 additional books each year.

During this time the library book donations, cataloging and management was led by the 12 ladies of the library.

In 1896, the books were then moved to inside the former Ripon City Hall Building at 125 Watson St. That building was razed in the 1960s and is the current location of Hamilton's Ladies' Clothing. In 1898, a 25-year lease for space City Hall was negotiated for \$1 annually (which equates to \$36.37 per year today). This lease agreement, and public access to read library books, was maintained for six years until Ripon's Carnegie Library, located at 401 Watson

St., was built in 1904.

Events leading up to building the Carnegie Library

Before Ripon's Carnegie Library was built a number of key events took place.

The first event was in 1902, when Ripon College President Richard C. Hughes (1861-1920) traveled to New York seeking an interview with Andrew Carnegie (1835-1919).

Carnegie was an industrialist and philanthropist whose steel manufacturing business made him the richest American in history by the late 1800s.

During the final 18 years of his life, Carnegie was busy giving away approximately \$350 million dollars (which equates to more than \$5.5 billion dollars today.) Hughes was seeking donation from Carnegie to the Ripon College Endowment Fund.

Although Hughes' primary interest was to secure funds for the college he also knew the Carnegie Foundation was donating money to build public libraries across America.

Hughes suggested to Carnegie's secretary the possibility of also sponsoring a library building for the city of Ripon. After returning from New York, Hughes received a letter from the Carnegie Foundation offering \$10,000 (equivalent to \$350,972 today) to build a Ripon library with stipulations that the city of Ripon would provide the site and land, raise 10% of the original funding annually for building maintenance and guarantee jobs at the library for local residents.

A Ripon City Council meeting was held to discuss this opportunity and both the citizens and city

officials voted to accept this offer.

The second event was a "letter of acceptance" from The Ripon Library Association in good faith while the City Council sought to purchase a site for the proposed Ripon Carnegie Library.

This marked the beginning of a struggle over where the library should be sited and built.

The City Council sought to purchase property at State and West Fond du Lac streets for \$2,000, which on further review was not the most ideal location due to its size. Two wealthy former Ripon residents, William J. Starr (1821-1879) and Sumner T. McKnight (1836-1908) offered to donate \$5,000 each to build the library in addition to the Carnegie Foundation's donation.

Starr felt the library should be located on property at the southeast corner of Blossom and Ransom streets due to its proximity to Ripon College.

At the same time, Ripon First National Bank President George L. Field (1836-1912) and donor McKnight favored property along Blackburn Street where the Ripon Post Office now is located.

While the debate evolved about which of these locations would be appropriate, the City Council was informed that a law limiting the cost of a library site or land be limited to a third of the Carnegie donation — meaning any land purchase could not exceed \$3,333.

This caused the site exploration to refocus, and land at the corner of Watson and East Fond du Lac streets (then occupied by H. Lyle's-Livery stable and brick barn) was purchased to make way for the library's construction.

The third and final event became the need to fill a City Council seat vacancy before their

voting for the purchase of Lyle's-Livery stable and land.

Simultaneously, mayoral and aldermanic elections were taking place, which enabled candidates to campaign on the issue of "Ripon library or no library." That caused John T. Harris (1834-1915) to be elected for mayor as he held a "for library" position.

And so the land at 401 Watson St. was purchased, the livery stable razed and the new library's construction broke ground.

Ripon's Carnegie Library became a reality

Carnegie libraries across America were designed in many configurations and shapes to accommodate their land-siting needs.

The Ripon Carnegie Library building was modeled after a similar structure's blueprint in Waukesha, and was completed in 1905 at a cost of \$12,000 (which equals \$411,594.55 today).

Understanding that Ripon's costs exceeded the original budget, the benevolent Carnegie increased his donation to cover all additional monies needed.

From beginning to completion, The Ripon Library Association, Ripon City Council, Ripon College president, attorneys and land owners understood the library's importance to the local community.

Both Starr and McKnight withdrew their intended donations as their contracts included their own preferred site selections. Therefore, the city of Ripon did not benefit from donations other than that of the Carnegie Foundation.

The former Carnegie Library building located at 401 Watson St. now is owned by a private individual and is leased to the Ripon Chamber of Commerce and Ripon Main Street as office space.

Today, the Ripon Public Library is located at 120 Jefferson St. Built in 1972, both the interior and exterior landscaping are scheduled to be renovated as an experience center.

To learn more, the library's capital fundraising campaign "Thinking Outside the Books" visit www.riponlibrary.org/renovation/. For more information on how to make donations via mail or online, visit see www.riponlibrary.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/RPL-Donation-Form-Final-2022.pdf

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 follow us at Facebook/riponhistory or www.riponhistory.org.



THIS IS A picture of the Ripon Carnegie Library shortly after its opening in 1905. submitted photo

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