

Local History Report

Gavin Schmitt

November 2024 (was too late to submit last month)

On October 17-18, I attended the Annual Local History and Historic Preservation Conference hosted by the Wisconsin Historical Society. This year, it was held at the Paper Valley Hotel in Appleton. During the conference I attended six sessions, listened to two keynote speakers, visited one museum, and went on an architectural walking tour. Each session resulted in copious notes and innovative ideas – I will report some of that here.

Building a Speaker Series: The Appleton Historical Society broke down how they create their monthly speaker series, which is comparable to our Focus on Local History.

Their attendance is 50-130 people each month. Per capita, that would be equal to 11-27 in Kaukauna. Our turnout is more on the lower end of that, so how do we bump it up?

Things Appleton does include a designated Facebook group (9,500 members), an e-mail mailing list, and appearances on local radio (WHBY). Whether we need a Facebook group or mailing list beyond the main library one is open to debate, but there is value in there being some sort of “official” resource for people interested in history. (This could be accomplished by the Kaukauna Library account posting historic items in already existing Kaukauna groups, of which there are many.)

The Appleton group used to hold talks at the Thompson Center before moving to Community First. Perhaps we would be better served having events at Statesburgh than in the library – bringing the material to the people who are most interested, but least mobile.

We should be recording the talks, whether live or not – at no additional cost or time we could have viewers for years to come.

Appleton has done “history fairs.” I could attend the Farmers Market with items that are safe to take outside the building.

Researching Historic Buildings: Leah Penzkover of the state preservation office provided a variety of resources.

Much of this was familiar to me (state site files, plat maps, Sanborn maps, register of deeds, city directories, etc.) but a few new resources emerged. We learned to navigate the Wisconsin Architectural Archive, which is a depository for blueprints and other construction papers. We learned how to read the tax rolls hosted at the Area Research

Centers (for Kaukauna, that's UW-Green Bay). And we explored USGS topographic maps, which can show how terrain was altered. In our case, Kaukauna used to have many ravines. A house's construction date can be narrowed down by when the land was terraformed to be suitable for construction.

A book, *A Field Guide to American Houses* by Virginia McAlester, was also suggested to learn architecture styles and terms. I admit this is a major blind spot of mine.

Dr. Vince Michael spoke on the history of preservation and why we preserve. What most stuck with me is, what does the community value? If a handful of people think a building is worth saving, but the vast majority don't, is it worth saving? The answer will vary case by case, but ultimately if the community isn't in favor, there can be no long-term preservation.

Wisconsin Newspapers Online. This may have been the least informative session but was the only practical one in the time slot. More than anything, it affirmed that we made the right choice to outsource our newspaper digitization.

Katie Poland, with the state microfilm lab and Chronicling America, explained that when John Friend retired from WHS, their microfilm digitizing went into moratorium and may never start back up. They also have a goal of hosting digitized Wisconsin newspapers, but the launch date for that would be in five years at the earliest. The cost, quality and speed of which we were able to get the Kaukauna papers online has no better alternative.

Google Maps. Dave Erickson of Docomomo (a group that documents midcentury modern structures) showcased how he used Google Maps to create custom maps of specific topics, and how he could add photos to the map. Much of what he showed us was superseded by the next session, but there was one big takeaway for me.

I've mentioned in previous reports I'm interested in developing a "field trip" app that uses Google Maps API to alert people to historic landmarks nearby. I now wonder if that would be reinventing the wheel. If a customized Google Map can be created, the app could just be gratuitous and only add an extra layer that does not need to be there for ease of use.

Digital Humanities. Professor Greg Kocken and a student from UW-Eau Claire presented how they used digital tools to create a virtual exhibit on the 1918 flu in the Chippewa Valley. This was the session that I took the most from.

One incidental takeaway was how to get students to volunteer/intern on local projects. That would be of immense value for anything beyond the scope of my usual duties.

The bigger takeaway: Kocken presented a list of digital tools that work with historical elements (primarily photos) and make them presentable to the public. They offer new

ways of storytelling, mapping and creating timelines for local events. I intend to explore each of these and will report back in the future – **every one was new to me.**

The tool that jumped out is called Historypin. The website overlays Google Maps, but rather than creating a new or personalized map, everyone shares the same map, but users have different accounts (so anything we added would say “Kaukauna Library Collection”). A “pin” goes on a location and clicking on it shows a photo that has been uploaded. Obviously, this would be to show how a building used to look, or to show people where something used to be that is not extant.

A really interesting feature is that it can overlay photos not just on the map, but on Google Streetview. If the user matches up a photo with the current view, Historypin allows people who use the site to toggle between the old and new image, comparing them. I have not personally explored the site more than five minutes, but it seems promising. Best of all, it is completely free.

Designating Local Landmarks: Jason Tish from the State Historic Preservation Office went through the steps of getting things on to the local, state, and national historic register. This is not a process I have ever attempted, so most of this was new and will require me to further read up on things.

Currently, I see no reason to pursue state or national recognition for any building in Kaukauna. Many properties are already there, and the survey process is quite expensive. I believe the City last had a survey in 1988 and unless someone wished to underwrite it, the results would not outweigh the cost.

Locally, I see several steps that could be taken. Does Kaukauna have a preservation ordinance, and if yes, is it adequate? Should a Landmarks Commission be created to serve as a buffer between historic interests and the Common Council? What preservation initiatives are part of the City’s long-term comprehensive plan?

Tish recommended simple, low-cost steps to get a building or structure recognized. One example was creating or expanding a Wikipedia article. Was a Kaukauna resident historically significant? If yes, they should have an entry. Dr. HB Tanner, arguably Kaukauna’s most important resident, has no entry. (It may sound silly to suggest someone is not important if they’re not on Wikipedia, but for many people this is the first resource they turn to and Kaukauna’s absence speaks volumes.)

Longer-term I hope to see signage honoring local notables. I would suggest something like a “walk of fame” ground marker for former mayors, industrialists, etc. This would avoid the potential problems of signage attached to private residences and businesses. Not everyone wants to have their home declared locally important, but I see little pushback on modifying the sidewalks so long as the cost is reasonable.

Kaukauna has a rich history... and we have yet to exhaust ways to bring it to the public.