

Local History Report (November 2025)

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In October, I attended the annual Local History and Historic Preservation conference put on by the Wisconsin Historical Society. The conference took place over two days in Baraboo, with hundreds of library and museum employees learning new skills and discovering new tools. As in previous years, I came back with pages worth of notes and ideas I'd like to implement as time allows. Some of the things covered:

Local Landmarks

I attended a session on local landmarks last year and again this year. It's something I strongly believe in. A landmark can be something highlighting an important event, person, architecture style, archeological site or even just something that's a visual touchstone. Landmarks create a sense of place and identity for a community.

Kaukauna has buildings designated as significant by the state or the national register. We do not, to my knowledge, have anything identifying LOCAL landmarks – places that are not important in a grand sense, but define what makes Kaukauna. An example might be Hill Top Bakery. The building is not architecturally impressive, but for over 100 years that location has been a rite of passage for Kaukauna residents – who hasn't had a chocolate filled doughnut? I have not thought about how to honor such places but feel such a way must and should exist.

Local Government Records

This was my favorite session. We went over what defines a "record" (Wisconsin statute 16.61) and what the law says about their retention and destruction (statute 19.21). As both a historian and an author, government records are something I work with daily; this was very close to home.

The biggest thing I found out was how many people DON'T know what is or isn't an open record. We were quizzed, given ten record categories and asked if they were public or not. For a room full of professional historians, I was shocked the majority did not get a passing grade.

The other big takeaway was what happens to a record at the end of its life. By law, a government entity (municipality, school district, sewerage district, court, etc.) cannot destroy any record without first offering it to the state. The state has 60 days to respond, and only then can a file be shredded. I asked the record custodian what was to stop a township from innocently shredding files without getting permission, and he conceded that there was no real way to enforce it. He could only know a record was destroyed if he first knew the record exists.

Records also must be kept only by government agencies, as they are subject to open records laws so long as they exist. If a municipality's records are turned down by the state, they can destroy them or pass them to another government entity (such as a library). They cannot, however, pass them to a historical society. It is illegal for a historical society to possess original records.

I cannot help but wonder which records from Kaukauna are turned down by the state but would still have value in our archive.

Banners and Signs

One session covered traveling banners and another on interpretive signs. The banner session was fascinating subject matter – how racial restrictions were written into property deeds – but we have relatively little use for banners at this time.

Interpretive signs are much more relevant to our needs. Such signs tell a story about a specific location, and have the advantage of being there 24/7. No employee or volunteer needed to explain why a site matters.

Over the past several years, Kaukauna has done well updating directional and identification signs (telling drivers where parks are, for example). We are sorely lacking in signage on our history. The Grignon Mansion has a marker on the 1793 land deed, but no sign actually explaining why the Mansion is important, or what other buildings were on the land, or of the Menominee village that existed in the flats. There is no sign explaining the locks. There is no sign highlighting the 1830s cemetery with War of 1812 soldiers. There is no sign highlighting the Statesburgh settlement. We are not without places highlighting our story (both Hydro Park and Thilwerth Park do this), but I feel we have a long way to go.

The Gaertner Diary

One session covered the process of translating ten volumes of diaries written by a priest named Gaertner who was in Wisconsin in the 1840s-1850s. The process is a slow one – only two volumes are done – but offers valuable, unique insight into Wisconsin in early statehood.

These diaries are interesting in themselves, but made me wonder: what diaries, journals, or letters exist in Kaukauna attics that tell stories we have never been told? I know, for example, of a diary kept by Mrs. Sibley that covers in detail her daily interactions. I read an account of her having influenza and how the doctors treated her that was both personal and beautifully written. That diary tells a story of Kaukauna that not even the newspapers of the day captured. Quite frankly, it deserves to be published.

Regional Tours

As part of the conference, after-hour tours were available to regional sites. I was able to explore multiple sites in Baraboo, and specifically the newly-renovated Al Ringling Theatre where we were treated to an advance screening of (part of) Ken Burns' new documentary on the American Revolution. I also traveled to the HH Bennett photography studio in Wisconsin Dells, where we were shown the process of making tintype and daguerreotype photographs. I had hoped to visit the Indian Agency House in Portage, but it did not fit my schedule.

The Bennett trip renewed my fascination with Kaukauna's early photographers, HW Donner and Meade Richardson. I have been adding photos from these studios to the library collection as I come across them on eBay or at auction. I'd love to reach a point where enough photographs could be assembled to make an exhibit from them on early portraiture. The hair styles and clothing, in addition to the photography itself, is a priceless artistic expression of Kaukauna.