

Local History 2022 Review and Looking Ahead

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2022 was a great year for local history. Coming out of pandemic restrictions, we were able to return to in-person events more or less in the same way as before. The monthly history talks have been slow to return, but the walking tours continue to be popular. This past year we added a Kelso Cemetery tour and on one evening 35 people attended (despite a cap of 20). I anticipate adding a new tour each year indefinitely to keep a steady rotation and encourage return walkers.

For 2023, monthly programming will consist of several all-new topics. I'm making a conscious effort to tell more stories of influential women. In the first few months, topics include: Beth Day (author/poet and champion of the first library), the hospital auxiliary, and the three Bell sisters of Grignon Street – one a library director, one a teacher and one the on-staff nurse for Thilmany.

As we enter the New Year, there are two major developments I am excited to share with the public. First, we anticipate launching the public version of Past Perfect in January. As you likely know, Carol VanBoxtel and Mary Hague have been working diligently for many, many, many months adding the 19,000+ photographs in KPL's collection into the Past Perfect database. Up to now, these scans were only accessible from one computer and not publicly available. Prior to their hard work, the photos were physically in binders with little organization – a nightmare for finding any single image in a timely manner. In January, we launch the web version, meaning the database will be searchable from anywhere worldwide. This is huge, to put it mildly.

Second, thanks to the donation of a generous patron, we were able to afford to digitize the entire run of *Kaukauna Sun* and *Kaukauna Times* newspapers (1880-present). This means 140 years of city history will be online and fully keyword-searchable from anywhere in the world. Newspaper editor Brian Roebke has signed off on any copyright concerns, so we're full-steam ahead. While we would still keep the hardcopy microfilm for backup, this change will allow exponentially-improved access for researchers, genealogists, etc. At the time of this writing, I do not know what the pace of this conversion will be or if the company contracted has any backlog, so there is no tentative launch date on our end. The first box of reels will be sent out shortly. I will alert the board when firm information becomes available.

With these two massive projects moving forward, I will be transitioning to what I call Phase Two. Tentative projects on the horizon include:

- A cell phone app to connect the community with historical images and information. Google Maps is open source, meaning developers can freely use the maps and GPS information. I envision a "field trip" app where a symbol appears on a map screen when someone is near a spot of historical significance. Clicking the symbol would bring them to Past Perfect and show them older photos of the spot they are standing on and/or a description of why that site matters. Ideally, I would like to work in conjunction with surrounding libraries and historical societies so the map has a wider usability.
- A "wiki" style database of biographies, organizations and business histories. Over the past five years, I have compiled numerous biographies and histories that are not generally

known to the public or easily accessed. I would like to get these and more online and cross-referenced. This could be as simple as adding the information to Past Perfect rather than creating a series of pages from scratch. At this time, I do not know PP's full capabilities and will explore that following the launch.

- Two Grignon family projects. In conjunction with being on the Grignon Mansion board, I have started on two Grignon-related endeavors. One is a complete genealogy of the family. The current rough draft runs approximately 430 pages, has over 2,000 descendants, is indexed, and is half done *at most*. The other is a directory of known archives containing Grignon documents. Such items are in Detroit, Milwaukee, Chicago, Appleton, Green Bay, and countless other places. Someone could write a comprehensive history of the northwest settlement and fur trade if they had a "road map" to the family documents. I will *not* be writing any such history, but hope to make a valuable road map. Kaukauna's role in this is clear: it was a mandatory stopping point for anyone hoping to reach the Mississippi or further west.
- World War I project. The library has a thorough (though not exhaustive) collection of letters home to Kaukauna during WWI. I've organized them chronologically, and added footnotes to add context for places, battles, etc. In the future, I'd like to add maps and more to create "the Kaukauna experience in World War I." As opposed to WWII or other wars, WWI covered a shorter period of time and fewer theaters, making for a more cohesive story.

Many other ideas are beginning to germinate, so who knows? I truly believe Kaukauna's history is important, fascinating, and (despite this) far too often overlooked. There is no end to the possibilities. As I approach my five year anniversary, I look back on the accomplishments made – due in no small part to our incomparable volunteers – and look forward to growing this small piece of the library's mission. Thank you for giving me such a privilege.