

Local History Report

Gavin Schmitt

October 2023

It has been six months since my last report, so a few updates for the board.

General remarks. With now over five years in my position, I am confident in my knowledge and abilities, and I'm making an effort to connect with other departments and local businesses. When these connections are made, the response is overwhelmingly positive and connecting the residents with their past is something both they and I place a lot of value in. Whenever possible, integration into the community will continue to expand. The library serves as the city's de facto historical society.

Newspaper digitization. The process is going slower than first expected because of turnaround times on scanning. At this time, the *Kaukauna Sun* and *Kaukauna Zeitung* are completely digital, and the *Kaukauna Times* is complete from 1880 through roughly the 1930s. At the current pace, the project may not be complete until mid to late 2024. The scans are fully searchable through newspaperarchive.com, and I've been made aware that people are finding this. On one occasion, a wagon and buggy researcher contacted us after finding an article online they would never have found otherwise. We also have copies of the digital scans on an external hard drive.

Our next step is uncertain. Initially, the plan was to host the digital files locally and allow people to search using free software called ResCarta. Other places, such as Oconto County, use this method. Because the digitization was covered by a patron donation, this meant the only cost to us was storage space. This route remains an option. It may also be worth looking into how much an in-house subscription to Newspaper Archive costs. In previous years, all OWLS libraries had access to this service, which was helpful in research because it also contains Appleton and Oshkosh newspapers (among countless others). The convenience and increased resource availability would have to be balanced with the cost before any determination is made.

PastPerfect. This summer we switched from our in-house single user PastPerfect subscription to an online subscription. Patrons anywhere in the world can access over 13,000 photographs and a wide variety of information on the people and places of Kaukauna. I want to acknowledge the hard work of volunteers (especially Carol VanBoxtel and Mary Hague) for making this happen. This project relied almost solely on the time and dedication of volunteers, and I could not be happier with the end result. Kaukauna Public Library is blessed to have such a wonderful team of volunteers – from projects like these to shelving, we literally could not operate without them.

Phase Two. I informally refer to the newspaper digitizing and PastPerfect as “Phase One.” With both of these major undertakings reaching the public, I have started to think about “Phase Two” and what BIG projects to pursue in the next few years. I'm certainly open to ideas from the board and general public.

- Digitization continues to be the buzzword in historical preservation, and while I don't think the physical documents will/should ever disappear, it's always good to see what

more can be added online, both for the ease of patrons, but also for the broader goal of exporting Kaukauna's presence beyond the walls of the building. As a researcher, I cannot overestimate the value of the millions of pages the National Archives and Library of Congress scan each year. For those with deep Kaukauna roots, the value of what we have may be equal to some national treasure.

- PastPerfect is more than a database of photographs and we should explore its other functions. Between filling patron requests and creating monthly programs and walking tours, I have amassed a large amount of business histories and local biographies, as well as over 70,000 Kaukauna-centric genealogical fragments. Integrating these into PastPerfect can transform it from the world's greatest photo album (already an important and amazing tool) into a rich, definitive Kaukauna encyclopedia.
- Though on the back burner for a while, I've long wanted to develop a "Walking Tour" app. With PastPerfect now public, this may be possible if each page has a defined HTML link (I'm unsure on this point). Google provides GPS data free of charge, so what I envision is a digital map with digital markers – clicking on the marker brings up a link to PastPerfect showcasing photos and information on that location. With GPS, we could pinpoint the exact spot a photo was taken in 1880 (for example) and a patron could bring up that image while standing on that spot today.
- Not that we don't already have many books on Kaukauna history, but as of now I plan to pivot in that direction in 2023. Carol VanBoxtel asked me to tackle the history of the police department, sort of as a complement to her fire department book. After hemming and hawing for a while, I am ready for the task. As many of you know, I have already been documenting major crimes for years, so it seems like a small step to shift that focus to the good guys and how the department has changed in the past 140 years. Further down the road, I am also considering a biography of Luther Lindauer, the most important person in Kaukauna history that most people don't know. And further still, I'm considering taking on the Grignon family. I have been perusing the family's archives in Green Bay, and I am of the opinion the family's involvement in politics and other areas has never fully been explored. Wisconsin's journey to statehood simply cannot be told without Kaukauna, and yet the depth and breadth of this contribution remains largely unknown.

At the risk of speaking too soon, I feel things in the KPL local history world are at a place where we can take on new challenges as the weight of the older challenges begin to lift. Again, I welcome any and all ideas... fresh perspectives are a must!