

Local History Report

May 2025

Gavin Schmitt, Local Historian

Antoinette Powell

On May 20, Antoinette Powell of Lawrence University presented on the topic of Charles Edgar Newman. She went through in detail, step by step, how she used resources from Kaukauna Public Library to trace Newman from Kaukauna, to Appleton, to Ohio, to Canada and to Haiti. As someone who regularly uses all the databases she highlighted, I can state that this was an EXCELLENT way to show new researchers the power of genealogy resources for history.

Newman, now a largely forgotten figure, was notable in Kaukauna as the first and only barber in the 1870s and 1880s. But he was so much more – his father was a runaway slave who corresponded with Frederick Douglass, attended university and became a preacher and fought for the abolition of slavery. His sister was a noted author. All three were accepted and respected in the social circles of Kaukauna and Appleton. They were even mentioned in Edna Ferber's autobiography. While the racial tensions of the 1910s and 1920s are well documented, we often overlook that Kaukauna was fully integrated in earlier years, and Newman is an example of this important story.

Grignon Integration

May marks the first full month of being the chair of the Grignon Mansion board and I intend to be very active in that capacity. This summer, all three local history presentations are Grignon-related, and will be cross-promoted with the Mansion's media outreach. I will also be on hand for more events and tours at the Mansion, and hope to expand the focus of the museum's mission. Not just arguably the state's oldest house, the Grignon story is a jumping off point for endless stories of the region – navigation, economics, culture, politics.

Also, with the permission of Community Enrichment and Recreation Director Terri Vosters, I will be moving the books and papers from the Mansion to the library's local history collection after Memorial Day. These are not artifacts or originals, but copies of research done over the past 85 years by the curators. Having such papers in the library will improve access for researchers. (Neither KPL, nor the Mansion, is a proper storage area for artifacts – but that's another topic.)

Dementia Awareness

Unrelated, but important, I recently joined a cohort of OWLS librarians to better serve patrons with dementia and vulnerable adults. With many of our clientele being older, it is important to recognize the signs that someone may be impaired, and the proper ways to handle this. I have already learned so much, not least of which being that memory loss is merely a symptom, not the entire illness. Dementia in its early stages can manifest in many other ways.