



IMPRESSIONS

WASHTENAW COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY NEWSLETTER • FOUNDED 1857

RICHARD L. GALANT, PhD

President's Letter

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The Washtenaw County Historical Society is a 501(c)(3) organization.

Information

Published Seven Times A Year
From September-May.

Museum On Main Street
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Post Office Box 3336
Ann Arbor, MI 48106-3336

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Web Site:

www.washtenawhistory.org

Annual dues: January-December individual, \$15; couple/family \$25; student or senior (60+) \$10; senior couple \$19; business/association \$50; patron \$100.

In the final count, there were almost 600 visitors to the holiday exhibit, *Trains in Toyland*, which ended in January 2009. We were delighted that so many children took advantage of being shown how to make simple dioramas by Fabian Beltran, a member of the Dexter Train Club. We are hoping to plan a similar exhibit for the next holiday event.

The current exhibit, *Coming to Washtenaw County: 1820 to 2009*, will run until the end of June 2009 and feature the various ethnic groups in our area. The exhibition committee has gathered many examples and invites members and friends to visit our Museum on Main Street. Group tours can be arranged by appointment. In addition, members of the Genealogical Society of Washtenaw County will be on hand the first Sunday of March, April, May and June to assist guests in finding information about their ancestors.

Jan Tripp, our Webmaster, continues improving the web site. Do take a look at www.WashtenawHistory.org where you will find information on our upcoming monthly talks, items for sale in the Museum Shop and articles of interest that Jan has gleaned from our files.

Please check out the items available for purchase from the WCHS Museum Shop. They can be found on the order blank included with this issue of *Impressions*. We are featuring a special sale of the Washtenaw County blanket/throws for \$40 plus shipping and handling, with the order blank. Normally \$50, they are very attractive and make great gifts.

The following volunteer opportunities are currently available and we would appreciate your help. Please contact us at 734.662.9092, or by



The antique trunk pictured is one of the items currently on display at the Museum on Main Street. See Page 5 for details.

e-mail: wchs-500@ameritech.net if you are interested and have some time to spare.

- Museum Shop Coordinator to work about an hour a week. Duties include upkeep of the shop goods, ordering new items, maintaining a running inventory (already on a computer disk) and caring for the sale monies.
- Green Thumbs and Brown Thumbs to work in our gardens three or four hours per week. We are very visible as part of the gateway to our city and want to be at our best. Watering is taken care of by an in-ground system that was installed in 2008.
- A helper who can spend three hours per week assisting our membership chair. Minimal experience is needed.

We have listed many events and learning opportunities on Pages 6 and 7 of *Impressions*. They will be taking place in and around Washtenaw County in the coming weeks and months and we invite you to take advantage of them.

PROFESSOR HENRY T. WRIGHT

Exploring the Archaeology of Wall Street and Lower Town

The old homes of Lower Town, including 1015 Wall Street (the original address of the Washtenaw County Historical Society's Museum on Main Street) have pretty much been moved or torn down to make way for University of Michigan Medical School buildings and other development projects. But according to Dr. Henry T. Wright, the February 15th speaker at the WCHS general meeting, the lovely homes that flourished in the late 19th and early 20th centuries hold secrets that can tell us much about the city we live in today, and the people who came before us. More than 75 people attended the lecture, held at the University of Michigan Exhibit Museum.

Dr. Wright, a professor of anthropology at the department of anthropology and curator of Near Eastern archaeology at the Museum of Anthropology, has studied ancient civilizations throughout the world. Why would someone interested in some of the oldest cities be interested in a relatively new city like Ann Arbor, he asked.

"A city is a city," he said in answering his own question. "We want to look at a wide range of different kinds of cities to be able to understand the general phenomenon of the development and genesis of urban centers."

Dr. Wright went on to describe his work, begun in the late 1980s, to discover evidence of Ann Arbor's first era of prosperity - the 1830s and 1840s. He said that developers at that time had high hopes for Lower Town, evidenced by the choices of street names like Wall Street, Maiden Lane and Broadway. And although he said the location, which was at that time separate from Ann Arbor, never lived up to those early expectations, it does provide essential information about the era. His talk focused on excavations done at the site of the Burnham House on Wall Street. He also discussed the Belding House and Sumner Hicks House, also on Wall Street.

Burnham House: 947 Wall Street

Built in the late 1830s by Nathan Burnham, this gracious home was purchased in 1969 by Dr. Mark Hildebrandt, who used it as his home and office. The house later served as the medical office and home of Dr. Edward Pierce, former mayor of Ann Arbor. In the spring of 1988 Dr Wright received a call from Liz Elling, an Ann Arbor preservationist. She told him that the house was scheduled to be moved to the Arboretum and suggested that he might want to do some archeological work before a new building on the site was constructed.

"At that time I was teaching a large undergraduate course and recruited some of my students to work at the site, get some dirt under their fingernails and see what archeology was all about," said Dr. Wright. He also received help with the excavations from members of the Huron Valley Chapter of the Michigan Archeological Society.

Work began in late spring of 1988 with excavations that began in the front yard and then moved to the back yard. Dr. Wright and his team wanted to get into the builder's trench to see the kinds of building materials that were used and to see what items were left behind by the people who lived in the houses. "We are really garbageologists," he laughed.

The front yard yielded glass and clay marbles, a tiny child's doll and some Canadian bank tokens and notes. "We also found lots of whiskey bottles in the front



The Burnham House at its new location, reinvented to become the James D Reader Jr. Urban Environmental Education Center. The brick smoke house, on the left, was moved at a later date to take its place next to the house. Photo by Henry T. Wright.

yard," said Dr. Wright. Although digging in the back yard was somewhat limited by brick walkways built by Drs. Pierce and Hildebrandt, the findings were interesting. They included planting materials from the 20th century, stone footings from the inside of the cellar, reddish silt and dark soil from the forest floor.

"This soil is all over Ann Arbor but it was the first time I had actually seen it," said Dr. Wright. "It told us that when these grand houses were built, the developers began right at the forest floor." Near the smoke house the archaeologists found buttons, probably from hanging laundry, beads, some building materials and pottery from the late 19th and early 20th centuries and a clay pipe inscribed with the letters "TD."



Ann Zinn, left, and Dency Terrill, both of the Huron Valley Chapter of the Michigan Archaeological Society, sift through materials that were excavated at the site of the Burnham Smoke House. Photo by Henry T. Wright.

"Closer to the house we found something very odd," said Dr. Wright. "A line of white cement that most likely was evidence of a water cistern." He explained that because Michigan's water is very 'hard,' many people saved rain water in cisterns in their yards. Without realizing that the water carried bacteria from the toilets, which were close by, they used it for drinking. In the days before anyone knew about water-borne infectious diseases, cholera was

of epidemic proportion in the United States and in Michigan and probably was responsible for many of the deaths associated with the early residents of Lower Town.

Belding House: 939 Wall Street

Located next door to the Burnham House, the Belding House was probably not built by the Belding family. "We name these houses according to the earliest known occupant," said Dr. Wright, which in this case was the Belding family, who lived here for many years in the 19th century.

"Unfortunately this house was covered with aluminum siding so we couldn't see the original construction," he continued. "We were appalled to discover, however, that the wood inside was almost intact. We did not see this on the Burnham House and it was a real tragedy that we did not get a chance to study the Belding House further. No one could be found to move it and a few days later, it was in splinters."

The four excavations on the site were not very successful, according to Dr. Wright. "It was cold and rainy and on the last day, we had freezing sleet to contend with," he said. "We found no early 19th century material but we did get some from the late 19th century. There were lots of beer bottles, mostly from the 20th century."



Advanced archaeology volunteers Eric Rupley, left, and Lynne Rainville excavating 20th century coal debris in the backyard of the Belding House. Photo by Henry T. Wright.



The Belding House, 939 Wall Street. Photo by Susan Wineberg.

Sumner Hicks House: 936 Wall Street

Sumner Hicks, the earliest occupant known to have lived in the house, was an Ann Arbor businessman, abolitionist and temperance enthusiast. The Kessler family occupied the house for many years in the 20th century.



The Sumner Hicks House, 936 Wall Street. Photo by Susan Wineberg.

"Alfreida Kessler protected it for years, refusing to allow developers anywhere near it," said Dr. Wright. "When she passed on in early 2000, the house needed serious restoration work and the family couldn't keep it up."

The management of the house went to the Durham Realty Company and Dr. Wright credits Tom Foley with finding a buyer, getting the house moved and overseeing the restoration. It is now located at 1335 Traver, near Pontiac Trail.

Dr. Wright and his team made five excavations around the Sumner Hicks house, which proved to be rich in 1840s debris that included a muskrat trap and lots of hunting equipment. "The forest was not far away, even as Wall Street was being developed," he said.

There was one feature of this excavation that was bittersweet for the archaeologists. They discovered plow marks indicating that there had been a garden leading from a porch back to the river.

"This said to us that by the time Mr. Hicks built his house, there already had been a garden here," said Dr. Wright. "The clue was that the garden continued to a cellar for an older 1930s house that had probably burned or been torn down and replaced in the 1840s or 1850s.



Early 19th century artifacts from the Burnham House cistern. From left, clockwise: rim fragment of blue shell-edge Staffordshire plate, bottom fragment of red transfer print Staffordshire plate, two fragments of a white clay pipe with "TD" inscription, white porcelain button. Photo by Henry T. Wright.

Unfortunately we didn't have time to do any more digging in this area."

Dr. Wright hopes to do more volunteer archeological work in Ann Arbor to help preserve the city's early history. "Although the expansion of the medical school is important, we pay a price in knowledge of ourselves," he said, emphasizing the importance of this kind of work. He credits the cooperation and support of Fred Meyer, retired university architect; Bill Dergis, retired university engineer; and Mary Krasny, current associate director for real estate and design, for "being open to these small scale projects."

Along with the archeological evidence gathered through excavations such as those in Lower Town, Dr. Wright is searching for architectural, textual and photographic evidence to combine into a book describing the *Lost Neighborhoods of Ann Arbor*. He welcomes photographs, letters and other general information and can be contacted through the university.

WCHS Wish List

Since we have begun using a banner on the side of our museum to advertise each exhibition, we find that we need a sturdy 20-foot ladder to help with mounting. Please contact us if you have a good ladder that you no longer need or would like to donate a nice new "industrial strength" one. You can contact us at wchs-500@ameritech.net or 734.662.9092.

Exhibit Chronicles Washtenaw County Immigration

A new exhibit focusing on the people who have come to Washtenaw County in the past 200 years will fill the rooms of the Museum on Main Street from March 1 to July 1. "Coming to Washtenaw County" tells the story of immigration from the human perspective. Who are the people that settled here? Why did they choose Washtenaw County? How did they get here? What skills and talents did they bring with them? What items from home were in their luggage? And who are the people who continue to settle here?

Special opportunities include:

- Genealogical Society of Washtenaw County members will be on hand the first Sunday of each month to help visitors trace their roots.
- A Thursday, March 12, Teacher Open House will offer ideas for awakening young minds to the excitement of history. The Open House is from 4 to 6 pm and refreshments will be served.
- Tours at times other than regular Museum hours can be arranged by calling Susan Nenadic, at 734.604.2467.
- Exhibit Sunday Specials will be listed in each month's Ann Arbor Observer Calendar.

Susan Nenadic, Washtenaw County Historical Society board member and women's historian, along with her committee of board members Joanne Nesbitt, Judy Chrisman, Susan Wineberg and Cynthia Yao, developed and installed the exhibit. The Museum on Main Street is open Wednesday, Saturday and Sunday from noon to 4 pm.



Included in the exhibit are these passport photos of Ulla Roth's parents, who fled East Germany after the war. Roth is a Washtenaw County resident.

PAULINE V. WALTERS Membership News

Over the years the Washtenaw County Historical Society (WCHS) has had a paid membership of about 400 addresses with about 50 more that were donors. WCHS is a 501(c)(3) organization and sends receipts for tax-deductible donations to the museum and its endowment funds, for in-kind donations, and for donations made in response to the annual summer fundraising mailing.

It has been brought to our attention that other non-profit groups send tax-deductible receipts for membership dues, which our society has not done. We are looking into this and if you have documentation that says membership dues are tax-deductible, please contact us at wchs-500@ameritech.net.

Your label indicates on the line above the name if you are a member or donor and in what year. Example: MEMBER 200x indicates that dues were paid for that year; 200x indicates that is latest year and was a donation. Every effort is made to keep these notices accurate.

Thank You!

to *The Ann Arbor News*
for donating seven
months'
worth of paper
for our newsletter.

SUSAN WINEBERG

Way Back When

PLANS FOR A MUSEUM CONTINUE

Last month we featured an article about attempts by the Society to purchase the former Christian Science Church on South Division, in 1930. Efforts continued throughout the decades and in 1966 this pitch, with its mysterious reference to a site worth buying, appeared. Needless to say, nothing came of this either. In May of 2009, the Museum on Main St at 500 N. Main celebrates 10 years of exhibits. The museum building was moved in 1990.

In the Huron Valley Ad-Visor of November 16, 1966, the following appeared on the front page:

WASHTENAW NEEDS A HISTORICAL MUSEUM

Frankly, friends, this is a pitch for money. Still with us? Good. The money is not for us. It's for the Washtenaw Historical Society so that they can buy a place in which to set up a museum of all the historical items from the early days of Washtenaw county so carefully preserved over the years.

What a marvelous Christmas present the people of Washtenaw could give their Historical Society—and themselves! A chance to preserve in safe surroundings and view the things that people who settled this area used in their daily lives!

The Society has been hoping to set up a museum for some 20 years. If a lot of us get behind the effort, we can do it now. The Society has in the bank \$7,877 thanks in large measure to the work of Mrs. I. William Groomes of 1209 S. State, who has been secretary-treasurer for that length of time.

We're not asking for outright gifts, tho they're welcome. We're asking that you become a member of the Washtenaw Historical Society. Dues are \$2-Single, \$3-Man and Wife, \$5-Sustaining, and \$50-Life.

If we could overwhelm Mrs. Groomes and the other 378 members of the Society with memberships, it's entirely possible the Society could purchase a piece of property they've long had their eye on. It could be refurbished and made into a museum and our sons and daughters would be able to get some insight into old-time Washtenaw...

Some of the things the Society has included are a tortoise-shell fan owned by Ann Allen, a large brass bed-warmer, a highboy one dealer valued at \$1,000, a compote that has been called "priceless," 2 dolls, 2 lace caps, a sewing bird, one log cabin quilt, a grandfather clock, an Empire sofa, pitchers, dishes, furniture of various styles, a syrup jug, Civil War uniforms and dresses and a pair of sugar shears (for use in cutting up maple sugar into pieces).

Right now, while it's in your mind, drop a check to Mrs. Groomes. Put it off and it will be forgotten. Like the early days of Washtenaw County.

Upcoming Events

Cobblestone Farm Association

Annual Barn Dance.

When: Saturday, March 21, 8-11:30 pm

Where: Cobblestone Farm Barn, 2781 Packard Rd., Ann Arbor, MI

Details: Put on your dancing shoes and stop in at the big barn for period dances and music provided by a live ensemble. Refreshments will be available for purchase in the barn.

Admission: \$7 per person
Information: Audrey Barkel, 734.429.2328.

Salem Area Historical Society

Annual Election and Potluck Dinner.

When: Wednesday, March 25, 6 p.m.

Where: Salem Township Hall, 9600 Six Mile Road, Salem MI

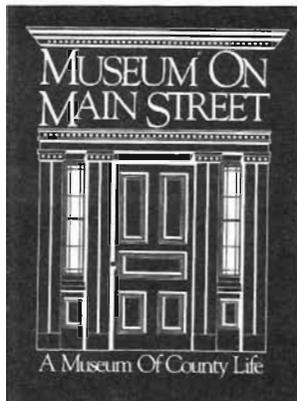
Details: Bring a dish to share. Business meeting will include discussions on projects and events for 2009. Memberships can be obtained and renewed.
Information: www.sahshistory.org

Michigan Firehouse Museum Fundraiser

2nd Annual Comedy Jam

When: Saturday, March 28, two shows: 7 and 9:30 p.m.

Where: Firehouse Museum, 110 Cross St., Ypsilanti, MI
Information: 734-547-0663



COMING to WASHTENAW COUNTY:
1820 to 2009
An exhibit of the ethnic groups coming here
March 1 to July 1, 2009
Wed, Sat & Sun: Noon - 4 & by appointment

Non-Profit Org.
U.S. Postage

PAID

Ann Arbor, MI
Permit No. 96

**WASHTENAW COUNTY
HISTORICAL SOCIETY**

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Ann Arbor, Michigan 48106-3336

SUNDAY • MARCH 15

TRANSPORTATION HISTORY
COLLECTION

KATHLEEN DOW/
SPECIAL COLLECTIONS LIBRARY
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INFORMATION • 734.662.9092
www.WashtenawHistory.org

MEMBER 2009
JAN E TRIPP
3260 BLUETT RD
ANN ARBOR MI 48105

95158 0020



Make Note - Dates to Remember

2009 General Meeting Schedule • 2:00 PM

- Sun., March 15 **Transportation History Collection**
Kathleen Dow/Special Collections Library
7th Floor, Hatcher, 48109
- Sun., April 19 **The Toledo War**
Glacier Hills, Hampshire Room
1200 Earhart Road, Ann Arbor, MI
- Sun., May 20 **Annual Meeting**
Location to be announce

Mission Statement

The purpose of the Washtenaw County Historical Society is to foster interest in and to elucidate the history of Washtenaw County from the time of the original inhabitants to the present. Its mission shall be to carry out the mandate as stated through the preservation and presentation of artifacts and information by exhibit, assembly, and publication. And to teach, especially our youth, the facts, value and the uses of Washtenaw County history through exhibits in museums and classrooms, classes, tours to historical places, and other educational activities.