

# NUGGETS OF HISTORY

the bi-monthly bulletin of the Rockford Historical Society

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## STATE ARCHIVIST GIVES US ADVICE

"Don't make the mistake of collecting 'attic storage' such as Aunt Susie's wedding dress or Grandpa's pair of andirons and catalogue them museum relics."

In these words Miss Margaret G. Norton, retired Illinois archivist, admonished our Historical Society to compile a chronology of Rockford's 130 years of growth. Declining to come here from Springfield to address our group, Miss Norton explained that her retirement years will be absolutely free of professional chores.

"I plan to come to Rockford for the 1909 R.H.S. reunion when I shall be happy to talk over my recent travels abroad, but I cannot break my rule of leaving bygone activities alone," she wrote. "Let me congratulate you on launching a new historical group in my home town. Except for the late Charles A. Church, Rockford has not had many historians. It would seem to me that there are scores of your members who would be interested in collecting photos of old houses, pioneer citizens and newspaper items from the library files of early day publications.

"Springfield's Junior League has been busy for months in compiling a chronology from old files in our Historical Library. Many of the anecdotes gleaned from this labor have been of great value to me in developing a history of our Episcopal Cathedral.

"Your letter sent my memory back to counting the number of old 'grout' homes that once reposed on many streets of Rockford. One in particular do I recall, that being at the corner of Park and N. Court streets. (Editor's note: the house mentioned was once the residence of Historian C. A. Church. It is still in good repair and is occupied.)

"My eight week tour of behind-the-iron Curtain countries in 1963 took us to several nations where an American had never

## THE QUARTERLY MEETING

Program Chairman Barbara Nelson and her aides are preparing a quarterly meeting of the society on Washington's birthday or the evening previous. Notices will be sent out for either a Friday or Saturday night session next week.

## LET'S KEEP IT WHITMAN:

During the past six weeks there has been much comment over naming the new Whitman Street bridge "Kennedy Memorial Bridge."

"Why not honor the memory of our late president," suggest the pro-memorial group, adding "who was this man Whitman," or "how come the street was called Whitman?"

On the other hand very few can answer the question as to Mr. Whitman. And those who are historical buffs have failed to come up with much information. After delving into five old directories, 2 volumes of Charles A. Church's histories and glancing at old platbooks, your editor declares for keeping it Whitman. The man for whom the street was named was one of the most influential Baptist clergymen in these parts between the years of 1836 and 1852 when he died.

The Rev. Seth S. Whitman was minister of the first Baptist church founded west of Chicago in 1836, at Belvidere, then located in Winnebago county. A Vermonter, Whitman graduated from Madison University in 1827 and was one of three in the first graduation class at Newton Theological school. After graduation he became professor of Biblical interpretation at Hamilton (N.Y.) Theological college, where he remained until 1834. Coming west he left Chicago to lead the first church group in Belvidere in August of 1836.

On Dec. 22, 1838 Prof. Whitman served as moderator at the organization of Rockford's third congregation, the First Baptist church. Sixteen signed the declaration of faith records of Dr. George Haskell, who served as clerk, disclosed. When Rev. A. Chapin rejected a call from the local group Rev. Whitman made frequent trips from

Contributions and Complaints should be sent to -----

Asb Johnson, Editor; G. Herman Nelson, Robert Borden, Mes. Richard Nielson and Edmund Porter, Contribution Editors.

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"ROCKFORD YEAR BY YEAR"

1834 - The first white settler in Winnebago County was Stephen Mack, who staked claims in Bird's Grove, near Rocton, in 1829. Though it is presumed that he probably navigated down Rock River to "Rocky-Ford" before 1834, Thatcher Blake and Germanicus Kent are credited with being the pioneer settlers of Rockford. This exploring pair had met in Galena, where they had arrived too late to gain wealth from the rich lead vein, then beginning to peter out.

In the spring of 1834 they decided to explore eastward and brought up at "Hamilton's Diggings", on the Pecatonica River. From there the pair chiseled a canoe from a tree trunk and set out by "oaring" down the river to its mouth thence south to Rocky-Ford, or "Midway" as it was called a few years later. Kent set up claims on acreage bisected by Kent Creek on the city's southwest side, while Blake filed on a site 1 1/2 miles west of the Rock River. Both men traveled by boat to Dixon and thence back to the metropolis of Galena (11,000 population) for hiring hands and obtaining utensils with which to build shanties and cut hay in preparation for winter.

Let's Keep It Whitman, Cont'd.

Between July of 1847 and October of 1848, Rev. Whitman was the minister of our Baptist church. Illness forced him to resign and until 1851 he remained inactive. Upon accepting a call to Madison, Wis. he served but 8 months before he was stricken. He died on Jan. 2, 1852.

Records at the county recorder's office indicate that Dr. Haskell's Addition to the plat of "Original West Rockford" indicated Whitman street as a northern boundary of the new subdivision. This was in the 'Forties and the bridge approach street has been known as Whitman ever since - named in honor of the tireless exponent of the Baptist faith. -W.A.J.

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His Honor, Mayor Robert Schleicher will be among more than a score of new members who will be introduced at the February meeting, according to President Bill Barrick...

Harvard, Illinois is our latest neighboring city to launch a historical society...

The appointment of Edmund Porter to a San Jose, Cal. post of the J.L. Clark Mfg. Co. is the cause of the resignation of Mrs. Porter-Chickie-from our directorate. She will, however, return to Rockford in March after a tour of house-hunting on the west coast for a few weeks...

Edward Hefferan, one of our newer members, has a scrapbook of clippings relative to a political scrap between the city council and a Rockford mayor. Ed's father, the late chief of our fire department in the 'Nineties, was the bone of contention.

1835 - Daniel S. Haight and family immigrated to Rockford from New England via covered wagon, in the early spring of 1835. The Hights built a frame house on what is now East State Street, just three blocks from the ford across the river.

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What about a name for this "baby" publication. With nary a new suggestion this issue is titled "Nuggets of History".

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Have you asked your neighbor to join the society? Do it now and help our group take a progressive step in boosting the Forest City.