

NUGGETS of HISTORY

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813 North Main Street
W.F. Barnes Home, now Park District Office



1260 North Main Street
Civil War Hospital

CHRISTMAS CEREMONIES CELEBRATE THE GAS LIGHTS

by Hazel M. Hyde

The Rockford Gas Light and Coke Company was chartered in 1856. The gas plant was then located on the site now occupied by the Rockford Public Library.

On Christmas night of 1856, a huge celebration was planned to celebrate the new gas lights. Two public halls were illuminated with the new fuel. A banquet was served in Warner's Hall, which stood on the corner of State and Main Streets. A dance was held in the Metropolitan Hall.

In February of 1857 the stores of Rockford were first lighted with gas. The cost to customers was \$4.00 per 1,000 cubic feet. The gas company failed and was sold to creditors in 1858. Under different management, the company was activated in 1869. The gas era, ushered in with Christmas celebrations and speeches by public minded citizens, had come to Rockford to stay for many years.

ROCKFORD'S CIVIL WAR HOSPITAL

by Robert H. Borden

On July 16, 1862, Adjutant-General Fuller issued an order establishing camps for temporary rendezvous in several cities of Illinois. General Fuller visited Rockford later in the month and personally selected the site for an encampment here. Before the summer was over, a camp had been built occupying the area now bounded by Guard and North Main Streets, Post Avenue, Auburn Street, and Rock River. Jason Marsh was placed in command, and he is said to have named the camp in honor of General Fuller. The general headquarters were at the corner of Guard Street and National Avenue.

Four regiments - the Seventy-fourth, Ninety-second, Ninety-fifth, and Ninety-sixth -- were given brief training at Camp Fuller before

leaving for battle. It was a camp of rendezvous for Lake, McHenry, Boone, Winnebago, Ogle, Carroll, Stephenson and Jo Daviess Counties. These regiments left for the front as soon as their brief training periods were ended, and the camp was then closed. On January 31, 1863 the barracks were sold at auction.

Although several Rockford streets and avenues in the old camp area remind present-day citizens of its history, the only building which remains standing is the house at 1260 North Main Street, shown on page one, which served as the hospital for the Union soldiers stationed at Camp Fuller in late 1862 and early 1863. This structure, however, was not built at the same time as the other camp buildings. It is believed to have been constructed around 1842, and it therefore is one of the oldest houses in Rockford. In addition to being used as a Civil War Hospital, it has from time to time throughout its history served as a farm house, single residence, and apartment building.

The longest tenure of residence in the old building was probably that of Hiram J. Sawyer, sometime sheriff and constable, who lived there beginning sometime following the Civil War until about 1903. During most of his stay the house number was 814 instead of 1260 North Main. George Hall, a west side barber, also resided there for about ten years.

In 1929 the John A. Logan Camp, No. 26, Sons of Union Veterans, were planning to convert the ancient structure into a war museum. They wanted to preserve at least one relic for Rockford from Civil War times. Their plan failed to materialize for some reason, and the house has continued to serve as a residence while changing hands several times. It has a spacious front lawn, but the back is built into the side of the hill, and there is very little backyard between the house and the alley. With walls which are said to be two to three feet in thickness, it will probably con-

tinue to grace the local scene for many years. However, the lack of parking facilities, including the banning of parking on both sides of Main Street, will no doubt preclude its ever becoming a museum.

OLD LETTERS CAN BE INTERESTING

by Hazel M. Hyde

Many Rockford attics contain packages of old letters that tell interesting personal experiences of early settlers here. A letter from Sweden, dated May 1, 1857, was addressed to August Lindblade from his mother in Jonkoping. This letter was written in Swedish and in the possession of Miss Sylvia Lindblade, 816 Kishwaukee Street, and translated by Mrs. Alvina E. Stanley, 1016 Third Street South. Quoting the translation: "You say, my sweet August, that you want to come to us again. Do you know that if it is God's Will that you come home, it will happen. When it comes the time it will be easier than it seems. If you could earn a little extra during the years for your trip home. The food doesn't bother us. I want you to know that you and your family are equally welcome as yourself to us, if you only come, and believe that. You promised your father when you sailed, that you wouldn't take your share in the estate. It has decreased some, but it will be a little (yet)."

This is but one of several letters which the writer surveyed and had translated in 1954 when writing a thesis entitled THE SWEDISH CHAPTER IN THE HISTORY OF ROCKFORD, ILLINOIS.

ROCKFORD'S TRADITION OF CIVIC AUDITORIUMS

by Hazel M. Hyde

Rockford's civic minded people united in the mid-nineteenth century to build an auditorium

large enough to meet their needs. A concert hall with suitable accoustics, where large crowds could be accommodated, was their immediate goal. Brown's Hall was build in 1864 and had its grand opening in 1865.

Dr. J. P. Norman leased the hall and brought to Rockford many notable persons until his death in 1883. John Murdock, a noted actor of that period, gave readings from Shakespeare in Brown's Hall on March 28, 1865.

Ole Bull, a famous Norwegian violinist, performed. Other notables appearing here were Artemus Ward and Lawrence Barrett.

A part of the Weise Building on West State Street is the auditorium that served Rockford theatre-goers one hundred years ago.

PARK DISTRICT BUILDING WAS W. F. BARNES HOME

by Robert H. Borden

The building which houses the Rockford Park District offices and the Museum of Natural History at 813 North Main Street was at one time considered to be the finest residence in Rockford. It was the home of William Fletcher Barnes from the time it was built in 1893, at a cost of over \$30,000, until his death in 1930. The Park District purchased the house in 1937 from Barnes' daughter, Mrs. Amy Barnes Lane, for \$12,000. Visitors to the Park District Office may gaze upon the picturesque wood panels which line the downstairs rooms. It is said that they were carved by more than a score of expert furniture workers, unemployed as a result of the 1893 depression, at a wage of fifty cents per day.

W. F. Barnes was born on a farm near Mt. Morris, New York, on August 6, 1841, a son of Joseph and Mary Barnes. His older brother, John, arrived in Rockford in 1856, and Fletcher, as W. F. was commonly called, followed in 1861. He worked for John in the firm of Barnes and Boynton, manufacturers of seeders,

and he later worked at the Clark and Utter Factory. In 1864 Barnes went to Aurora to work in the Chicago, Burlington, and Quincy Railroad shops, returning to Clark and Utter's in 1868. His parents had also come to Rockford, and he lived with them at 409 North Winnebago Street. Brother John was already married and living at 508 North Court.

After his return to Rockford, Fletcher set up a work bench and small shop in his home, working out some of his first ideas for inventions and building models. He opened a model shop upstairs over Menzinger's Store at 125 West State about 1870, and together with his younger brother, B. Frank Barnes, worked out several inventions including the jig saw.

John Barnes was also an inventor, having developed Barnes' self-rake reaper, and in 1873 the two brothers formed the W. F. and John Barnes Company to manufacture jig saws, grinders, and other inventions. Although John was the older brother by about eight years, Fletcher served as president of the company and John as secretary and treasurer. B. Frank Barnes became vice president, but about the year 1900 he left the firm and founded the B. F. Barnes Company, the name of which in 1908 was changed to Barnes Drill.

In 1900 W. F. Barnes, while remaining at the helm of W. F. and John Barnes, also became president of Manufacturers National Bank. When his son Joseph died in 1905, Fletcher began to lose interest in the Barnes Company. He sold his interest in the firm to H. L. Pratt of Brooklyn, New York and for a time became vice president of the Inter State Steel Company. Later he served as vice president of Forest City Insurance Company, and also as a county supervisor. He died on December 28, 1930, at the age of eighty-nine.

THURSTON REMINISCENCES INTACT

by Hazel M. Hyde

Preserved in the Rockford Public Library is a slim volume published in 1891. It contains the reminiscences of John H. Thurston, who came here with his father, Henry Thurston, from New York in 1837. John Thurston was a thirteen year old boy when he came to Rockford. In his book, Thurston recalled that when he arrived, Rockford consisted of a cluster of buildings at State and the present Madison Street, then called Main Street.

He stated that on the northeast corner was the framework of Daniel Haight's new house, and directly east, the Haight log cabin. Other buildings which he described included Haight's Rockford House on the northwest corner of the clearing, William Penfield's blacksmith shop at the northwest corner of Market and Madison Streets, and Haight barn on the northwest corner of First and Prairie Streets.

This Thurston book was consulted recently in determining the location of the rock ford, prior to the placing of the marker.



Daniel S. Haight's Residence

Built in 1837 on the northeast corner of East State and Madison Streets; stood for many years on the northeast corner of South Second and Walnut Streets; razed about 1906. The first session of the Circuit Court was held in this house.

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