

# NUGGETS of HISTORY

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## OFFICERS RE-ELECTED

The annual picnic meeting of the Rockford Historical Society was held at Sinnissippi Park on Sunday, September eighth. All of the officers for last year were re-elected. They are Robert H. Borden, president; Emma C. Lundgren, first vice president; Jesse Robinson, second vice president; Arthur Huenkemeier, third vice president; Hazel A. Kluck, secretary; and Faith Armstrong, treasurer. Three new directors were elected: Mrs. Eleanor Overfield, Mrs. John McHugh, and Phillip B. Johnson. Mrs. Overfield had previously been an alternate director. The directors re-elected were Mrs. Blanche Alden, Paul S. Conklin, Mrs. W. Ashton Johnson, Miss Theodora Van De Mark, and Mrs. Harold Hyde.

The election and business meeting followed a delicious dinner which was catered by the Top Hat restaurant. Although the weather appeared threatening for a while, the rain held off and everyone had a good time.

## "A MR. NETTLETON BUILT THE FIRST GRIST MILL IN 1840" By Mary Hills

By writing his history of early Rockford, Mr. Charles A. Church has earned our eternal gratitude and perhaps the right to be called our most valuable citizen. However, his reference to "a" Mr. Nettleton as the man who built the first grist mill suggests that he did not know the early Methodist community near the site of the present Centennial Methodist Church. Even Mayor Robert Rew could have told him much about Mr. Nettleton, for he was a neighbor of Mr. N. and a boyhood friend of one of his grandsons.

Moses Nettleton brought his family from Canada in 1839. In an item for the OGLE COUNTY REPUBLICAN, a granddaughter described the trip thus: "I have heard my Aunt Jane Hills tell how she helped drive the pony and gig which followed the covered wagon. The children were Jane, John, George, Annis, Harriet, and Hannah. They had lots of fun joking Jane about asking to have the Bachelor Hills pointed out. Later she married what she thought was a landmark."

Seth Hart Hills, the first to marry into Moses Nettleton's family, was 14 when he ran away from his home in New York because he resented his new stepmother. When he arrived in Ogle County in 1828, there was plenty of solitude in which to nurse his wounded feelings.

Just when the Nettletons moved to Rockford is not clear. In 1839 they started farming in the Lighthouse area and apparently bought the farm five years later at the low homesteader price. Probably most of the family stayed there while one or two of the boys helped their father build and run the mill in Rockford. Family legend says they went to Wisconsin for choice timber and floated it down to Rockford.



Moses Nettleton

On June 29, 1841, while James was visiting his sister on the Hills farm, a crowd streamed past toward the woods on the north. Being God-fearing men and sticklers for LEGAL justice, both Seth Hills and James Nettleton were shocked to learn that a mob was taking three Driscolls to the woods for execution. They hurried after the crowd, looked up the leaders, and pleaded with them to turn the prisoners over to the sheriff. The rest of the scene is well-known local history. In a sort of trial, the Driscolls spoke in their own defense and secured the release of the youngest. The others were executed on a spot still marked by a boulder.

However, the later trial of the mob for murder is not so well known except in jurisprudence. In it lawyers find a

Old Nettleton House on South Second Street



legal precedent for hasty trials for only one purpose -- to secure a "not guilty" verdict. The indictment was read to the jurors, a cursory case presented, the jury polled right in the box, and a prompt acquittal achieved. The indictment would be incredible if it were not a matter of record, for it names two or three leaders "and 103 others." Later the list of "others" included everyone present at the scene -- even James Nettleton and Seth Hills.

Apparently Moses Nettleton maintained both the Ogle County farm and his Rockford home for many years. Though he and most of his children are buried at Lighthouse, he was still living in 1870 in the house he designed and built on the southeast corner of South Second and Grove streets. When Helen Drew of Rockford College became interested in it, she could find only that old-timers knew it as "the old Nettleton house." Her interest lay in its architecture: it was the only "true" English cottage she had found in this area. Its plaster coat was neither adobe nor stucco but a mixture native to England. The fan-shaped window in the gable was also truly "English."

By 1857 Harriet Nettleton was 22 and freshly made the widow of John Taylor, the sheriff. They had two infant sons when he was shot by a youth he had arrested for cattle theft. Merritt, the baby, told this writer a sequel recorded nowhere else. (His word is reliable. In 1883 he graduated from Northwestern at 27 and took a bicycle tour of Europe with Fernando Sanford. Later he helped Sanford found the famous math department at Leland Stanford University.) He told how his mother used to relive the incident, recalling her pity for the "frightened boy" who had turned and shot wildly as he fled, "accidentally" and unfortunately hitting his target. She had not only written to the governor but had also made the long trip to Springfield, part by stagecoach, in a futile effort to have the sentence commuted. The subsequent public hanging is one of the ugliest chapters in local history.

Jane Nettleton must have been living at Lighthouse dur-

Sheriff John Taylor



ing the Civil War, for her son Frank had two vivid memories of the war. When he was about ten, an "endless" column of soldiers straggled past headed south. That night he fell into bed, the tireddest and happiest little boy in the world. All day he had run back and forth from pump to road, keeping a row of pails filled and seeing face after tired face light up at the taste of cold, fresh water.

His other memory was of accompanying his father to the "depot" to claim his big brother's flag-draped coffin. That was the only time he had seen his father cry.

By the fall of 1865 Jane and her family had joined her parents in Rockford. Their oldest daughter, Mary Eliza, had finished Mount Morris Seminary and was teaching in the old east

side high school. (There was one, you know! It occupied the third floor of the school on the site of the present Henry Freeman School.) When Henry Freeman, the principal, left each afternoon to supervise the east side elementary schools, she served as principal. Apparently her father, Seth Hills, came to Rockford as a member of the Ward Pump Company but was probably out of his element. He loved his farm and disliked both being in business and living in town. After Mary died of "consumption" in 1868 and Frank finished



Robert Rew, Clark brothers, and Frank Hills

high school in 1870, he moved back to the farm. (Just by way of comparison, the East High class of 1870 had eight graduates.)

In the summer of 1871, Seth Hills was building a town house in Oregon and son Frank was home on vacation from Northwestern. As Frank shingled the roof, he grew more and more puzzled by a weird black cloud on the eastern horizon. Later came word of the Chicago fire.

The only one of Moses Nettleton's children to see the twentieth century was Annis, who died in the 1920's at the age of 88. Not much older than her niece Mary, she graduated with her from Mount Morris. After the war, the Freedman's Aid Society sent her to open a school for Negroes in a Southern community. Both the blacks and whites ostracized her, and the seven children who dared attend had to live in the school. Oddly enough, food appeared mysteriously every night. When funds ran out, she brought her seven young dependents home with her to Lighthouse. There each of seven families took one child to rear with their own. The oldest and only girl remained in Oregon, a respected seamstress, until she died. The six boys, however, slipped away in the night to Chicago as soon as they reached dating age. Frank Hills had felt a deep affection for his "brother" Jim, the last to slip away, and missed him. Some years later he was elated to find him playing semi-professional baseball in Chicago. Jim seemed equally happy and invited him to his home for dinner. He was very proud of his lovely wife and two children and glad to have a member of his white family meet them.

STEPHEN MACK  
By Hazel M. Hyde

Stephen Mack was born in Poultney, Vermont, and his early life was characterized by a love of adventure. He is credited with being the first white man to settle in Winnebago County, about 1829. He had learned from traders that Rock River offered opportunities for a trading post. He located his trading post east of Pecatonica, near Rockton.

He platted a village, about 1835, at the mouth of Pecatonica River, which he named Macktown. This is the area embracing Macktown Golf Course and Macktown Forest Preserve. His home has been preserved as a museum and contains many items presumed to have belonged to the Macks as well as other items of the period.

A general merchandise store was operated by Stephen Mack. There is a Whitman Trading Post constructed of stone at a later date, which is preserved and marked. This stands on the site of the log store of Mack's time. Mack also operated a ferry. He was elected associate judge in 1849.

About 1825 Stephen Mack married Ho-no-ne-gah, a daughter of a Pottawatomie chief, in an Indian ceremony. She was credited with saving her husband's life on one occasion. The Macks had eleven children. On September 14, 1840, Mack and Ho-no-ne-gah were remarried in a civil ceremony, in order to protect the children and the estate. Ho-no-ne-gah

died in 1847 and was buried on the farm.

After Ho-no-ne-gah's death, Mack married a Mrs. Daniels of Harrison in 1848. On April 10, 1850, he died suddenly and was buried beside his first wife on the Mack farm. On May 19, 1880, their remains were removed and buried in Phillips cemetery, near Harrison. Recently the remains of Mack, Ho-no-ne-gah, and their two children who died in infancy, were returned to Macktown.

WEDDED THE WAITRESS, UP IN THE WILDS  
OF WISCONSIN WHERE IT'S EASY  
(Reprinted from THE ROCKFORD  
DAILY REGISTER, November 18, 1889)

Some weeks ago Miss Mary Curran was a waiter at the Chick House, where she had been employed for some time. Fred Zimmerman, a watch factory employe, boarded at the hotel. For some time he had been paying attention to Mary who seemed to smile favorably upon him. There was talk of the couple marrying and this came to the ears of a Mrs. Hamilton whose husband works in the silver plate factory. When she heard of the affair she went to Mrs. Chick and told her that Zimmerman had a wife and several children elsewhere. Upon being told this Mrs. Chick called Mary to her and informed her of what Mrs. Hamilton had said. Mary did not seem to take much stock in the story and she and Zimmerman continued to keep company with each other. Hearing further about Zimmerman's family, Mrs. Chick told Mary that she must either stop receiving further attentions from him or she must leave the house. Mary thereupon left and Zimmerman ceased boarding there.

Last Saturday afternoon he applied to County Clerk Norton for a marriage license for himself and Mary. He swore that there was no legal impediment to their union and the clerk issued the license. He then went to Father McLaughlin to perform the ceremony that evening. The priest questioned him and not being entirely satisfied with the answers received, would not say whether or not he would officiate. After Zimmerman left, Father McLaughlin went to the Chick House and inquired about the couple. He was told that it was reported that Zimmerman had a wife and several children and he was referred to J. B. Little for further information. Mr. Little told the priest that the other day a member of a lodge to which he belonged came to him during a meeting and asked if there was no way to prevent an outrage from being committed. Mr. Little asked him to explain what he meant, and the member told him that a man who had deserted his wife and four small children was trying to marry a young lady in this city. Fred Zimmerman was the man and Mary Curran the young lady. That was all that he knew of the matter. At night when the couple presented themselves at the home of the priest he refused to unite them in marriage. Zimmerman denied the rumors at first but finally admitted that he had been married and divorced. Father McLaughlin refused to have anything to do with the af-

fair and the couple departed untied.

They then secured a carriage at Keyt's livery stable and were taken to Beloit where they were joined by Rev. Mr. White, a Methodist minister of that place, who has officiated in a number of quiet, short-notice events of a matrimonial nature. They returned to this city yesterday afternoon and are stopping at the stone boarding house on the corner north of the watch factory. A REGISTER reporter called there this morning and was informed by the bride that she was married to Zimmerman. In regard to the rumors of another wife she said that he had satisfied her that everything was all right or she would not have married him.

There were a large number of persons disappointed by Father McLaughlin's refusal to marry the couple. They had gathered at the home of Mr. McKenna, at 403 $\frac{1}{2}$  S. Winnebago Street, to give the couple a reception. Mrs. McKenna is the bride's cousin. Refreshments had been prepared and music secured for dancing. After waiting until nearly 10 o'clock, the guests dispersed.

Upon investigation, a REGISTER reporter was shown a letter written by Mrs. Fred Zimmerman, of 715 West Third Street, Springfield, Ill., who states that she is Fred Zimmerman's wife, and that he left her with four children to support. She is working in the watch factory there. She also states that he has never secured a divorce from her.

All this looks very bad for the groom, but it may be that he has managed to obtain a divorce quietly and without her knowledge. It would certainly seem that he would know too much to commit bigamy so boldly.

It is also rumored that he has another wife living in New York, and that he lived with her at Canton, Ohio. There may be nothing in this, and it is possible that the Mrs. Zimmerman now living at Springfield may be the same Mrs. Zimmerman which rumor has connected him at Canton.

At any rate Fred and Mary are finally married.

SWEDE MEETING  
(Reprinted from the ROCKFORD GAZETTE,  
October 1, 1868)

A meeting of the Swedes of the city of Rockford was held at the Court House on Monday night last, to hear a speech from A. Hanelius, Esq., of Chicago. For some reason or other, Mr. H. failed to make his appearance, and the Swedes who had gathered in large numbers at the Court House, filling the room, were compelled to rely on their home speakers. Mr. S. W. Blomquist, who presided over the meeting, made a few pertinent remarks, and was followed by another gentleman, who also addressed the audience in the Swedish language. He was followed by Wm. Lathrop, Esq., who spoke in English, and delivered a very able argumentative address in favor of Grant and Colfax. About half past nine, Gen. A. C. Fuller, who happened to arrive in the city on the "accommodation," was called on, and spoke for over an hour. The President of the meeting stated it to be a fact that every Swede in Rockford is a supporter of Grant and Colfax.



The photo at the left was taken in June of 1919, according to Mrs. Eleanor Overfield, who provided us with the picture. The occasion was the Henry Freeman School graduation pageant of that year. Young Abraham Lincoln is seated at the front, being played by Fred J. Kullberg, present Circuit Judge. Left to right in the back row are Charles Gage, Ralph "Aja" Johnson, and a boy whose first name was Wendell, but Mrs. Overfield forgets the last name. Young Gage was the son of the pastor of Centennial Methodist Church.

The photo below was provided by our secretary, Miss Hazel Kluck. The latest model car appearing seems to be a 1938 Buick (the coupe), but we will welcome corrections or comments.



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