

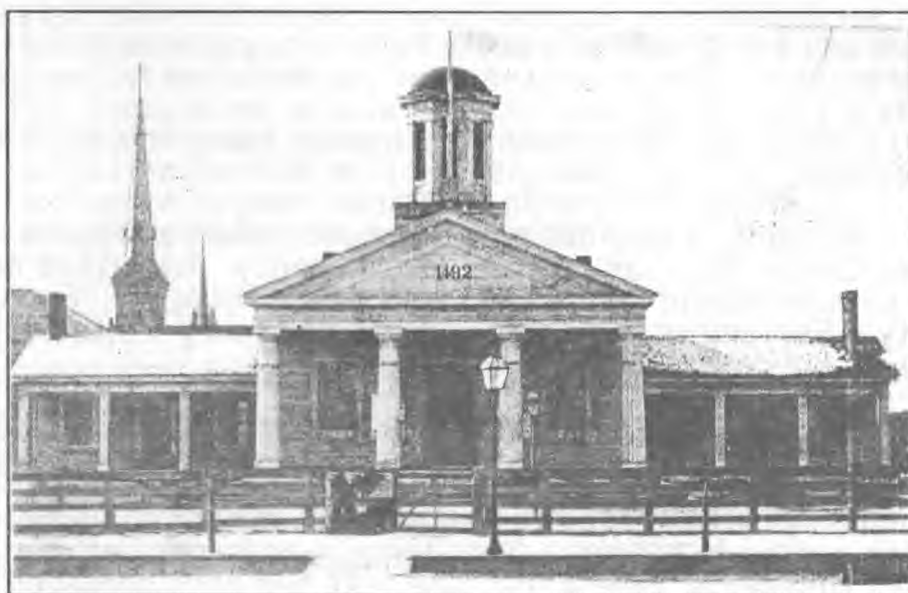
# NUGGETS OF HISTORY

VOLUME 32

FALL 1994

NUMBER 2

R. P. PORTER'S HISTORY SKETCH  
OF THE FIRST SETTLEMENT OF  
ROCKFORD AND WINNEBAGO COUNTY, PART 2



Courtesy, Rockford Public Library.

Rockford's 1844 courthouse, designed by Deratus Harper and John Beattie, represented one of our city's finest Greek Revival structures. It contained a courtroom, two jury rooms, and offices for county clerk, recorder, sheriff, circuit clerk and probate justice of the peace.

## FROM AN EDITOR'S DESK

In this issue we continue the Rockford/Winnebago County historical sketch written by R. P. Porter in 1876. Then the 23-year-old Porter worked as city editor of the Rockford Gazette. His historical sketches appeared serially each week in the newspaper. Those pieces formed a major source for all others writing early histories of Winnebago County. The text we've reprinted was discovered in the cornerstone of the 1878 Winnebago County Court House when it was razed in 1967.

Porter, born in England, lived in Rockford only four years (1873-77) before moving to Chicago. There he continued writing for newspapers, specializing in economics and statistics. In 1890 he served as Superintendent of the United States Federal Census. He died in London, 1917, where he had been working as a correspondent and writer.

Our second article represents a first-person interpretation written and performed by Lois D. Peterson, current Mendelssohn Club president. She presented it at the Rockford Historical Society's 1994 spring meeting and also at an October 1994 Mendelssohn Club concert commemorating the club's 110th anniversary.

Lori Whitman, a member of the support staff at Educational Service Center No. 1, an Illinois state agency, submitted her first-person interpretation of Laura Potter Gregory. For our society's September 1993 Cedar Bluff Cemetery Walk, Lori prepared and presented this story.

In Nuggets of History, Volume 30, the only issue published in 1993, then-editor Robert Lindvall introduced changes in format: full-size pages, space-and-a-half typing, wider margins. He responded to requests for easier readability and for opportunities to place copies in binders. This issue represents yet another change. Instead of typescript, the text has been prepared on a Macintosh 512k using 12 point Geneva font in boldface print. For future issues we are exploring desktop publishing possibilities prompted by a generous offer from Lori Whitman.

We regret that Robert Lindvall deemed it necessary to resign as Nuggets editor effective October 7. Health problems prevent him from continuing this task. Our co-president Robert Borden then appointed Associate Editor Peggy Jensen as acting editor.

*Peggy Jensen*

HISTORY SKETCH OF THE FIRST SETTLEMENT  
OF ROCKFORD AND WINNEBAGO COUNTY, PART 2

(Continued from Volume 31, Number 1, Winter 1994)

by

R. P. Porter, June 20, 1876

Before the year 1835 closed we find the population had increased from the eleven previously named to the following:

Rockford--Ephraim Wyman, Wm. E. Dunbar, John E. Vance, Eliphlet Gregory, P. P. Churchill, Mr. Smith, Louis Haskins, Mr. Jolly, John Caton, Chas. Hall, Milton Kilburn, Luke Joslin, Israel Morrell, D. A. Spaulding, Lova Coy, Adam Keith and a few others who may have been overlooked.

New Milford--Samuel Brown, William R. Wheeler, Richard Hogaboom, Phineas M. Johnson, John Adams, James Campbell, John B. Long and Mr. Paddleford.

Guilford--Henry Enoch, William H. Enoch, Abraham I. Enoch, H. R. Enoch, J. A. Pike, John Kelsoe, Mr. Rexford, James Sayre, Abel C. Gleason, John Brink and William B. Blair.

Cherry Valley--Joseph P. Giggs.

Harlem--William Meade, Chauncey Meade, and Z. Butler.

Rockton--Thomas B. Talcott, William Talcott, Henry Talcott, John F. Thayre, Isaac Adams, Perley P. Burnham, Darius Adams, David A. Blake, Ellison Blake, John Kilgore and John Lovesee.

Owen--James B. Lee and Richard B. Walker.

Burritt--Isaac Hame, James S. McIntosh, A. M. Shearman, John Manchester and family, Elias Trask and Alva Trask.

Lysander--Ephraim Sumner, William Sumner, Mrs. Dolly Guilford, Elijah Guilford and Thomas Hame.

Winnebago--David A. Holt.

Howard--Harvey Lowe and Nelson H. Salisbury.

Seward--Thomas Williams, Joseph Vance, Austin Andrews

and Edmund Whittlesey.

Harrison--Joseph Miner, Albert Fancher, Eli Burbank and Mr. Barneby.

Those, then, were the early settlers of Rockford the pioneers of the 40,000 living souls that 42 years later are building a monument of their prosperity, and their perseverance; and of their indomitable will, to meet and overcome obstacles in the general march of improvement.

In January 1836 Winnebago County was organized under the state law and became a regular county. The first surveys of Winnebago County were made by D. A. Spaulding, who commenced the extension of the Third Principal Meridian at a timber corner about two miles north of the point where the said line crosses the Illinois River in October 1835 and continued said line to its intersection with the line between Illinois and Wisconsin.

The first Court House was a house owned by Daniel S. Haight and was used as such according to the section of an act which passed the legislature and which authorized three commissioners--Robert Stephens, Rezin Zarley, both of Cook County, and John Phelps of Jo Daviess County--to locate the county seat. They located the county seat two miles from the present Court House--north of Rockford. In section fourteen township number forty-four north, range one east of the third principal meridian, at a point fourteen chains south of the quarter-section, on the line dividing sections thirteen and fourteen, and four chains west of said line, upon which point the stake was struck on the 16th day of July A. d. 1863 on land owned by Nicholas Boilvin & Co.

Rockford people, however, would not brook being robbed of their county seat, so after petitioning the legislature, they obtained the right to hold an election to decide the matter. After an animated

election, Rockford won and the fight then simmered down to which side of the river should have the Court House and Jail. This matter was not finally decided until April 23, 1843, when the county Board of Commissioners accepted the proposition of Geo. Haskell, C. I. Horsman, H. W. Loomis, M. Burns, Chas. Hill, Thos. d. Robertson, G. W. Dewey, D. D. Alling, H. R. Maynard, O. Thomas, Skinner G. barrows, J. Fisher, D. Harper, D. Dow, to build a Jail and Court House and furnish the land without money and without price. The result was the late jail and the old Court House. (*Editor's note: Photo appears on cover.*)

Since the days of Kent and Blake Rockford has made long strides onward. She has now a population of 15,000 persons. A large number of Reaper and Agricultural implement factories; a Tack Factory; a Walch Factory; three furniture factories; file factory; oat meal mills, a number of flour mill and saw mills; two wire factories, Extensive Cotton Mills; Distillery; three Breweries; large Malleable Iron Factory; bolt factory; two extensive paper mills; number of machine shops; four Pump and Wind Mill factories; five carriage factories and a vast number of other industries.

There are seventeen churches many of them elegant; three newspaper offices; seven Hotels; four Railroad depots; a public Library; a Public Museum; two public parks, new jail; new Post Office; a fine iron bridge over Rock River; a fine Fairgrounds and a vast number of other public improvements. The business houses are numerous and some of them elegant structures, and the stores beautifully and tastefully arranged. The community is decidedly an enterprising one; the Water Power where the major part of the machine shops are located employing over 2000 mechanics. One of the great advantages of the city is its complete protection from fire by a system of Holly water Works, with 23 miles of pipe. This comprises a fair idea of Rockford in 1876.

CORA BLANCHE ELLIS STARR (1854 - 1943)

MENDELSSOHN CLUB FOUNDER

by

Lois D. Peterson

My father Edward F. W. Ellis of Felicity, Ohio, followed the Forty-niners to California. Gold-mining didn't prove profitable; instead he practiced law. Two men from Rockford--Dexter Clark and Charles Spafford--told him about a promising Illinois community developing along the Rock River. Returning to Ohio, father moved his family to Rockford in 1855 when I was one year old. Here he joined his friends in the banking firm Spafford, Clark and Ellis. During the Civil War my 42-year-old father felt duty-bound to organize a company for the Illinois Regiment. Unfortunately, he died at the battle of Shiloh, leaving my mother a widow and four children fatherless.

I loved music--especially piano playing--early in my childhood. At the old Lincoln School, I attended classes with fine young people such as the Emersons and the Starrs. Later, I studied at the Rockford Female Seminary and at conservatories in Chicago. On New Year's Day, 1874, I married Chandler Starr, a cashier in his father's bank--the Winnebago National Bank.

I served as organist at Second Congregational Church for 29 years. Then, too, as a young matron, I saw a need to keep music alive in other young women. Thus on October 4, 1884, I invited 20 women with musical talents to my home for an afternoon of performing. They brought sewing and fancy work so that our time together would not be considered frivolous. This event was so musically satisfying and stimulating that we decided to form a club. Since we young women admired contemporary composer Felix Mendelssohn, we named our club after him. Mendelssohn Club met fortnightly in homes. I served as president.

Mendelssohn Club became my passion. But I did not neglect Chandler nor my daughter Norma. Although one time, I must admit, I had an important club meeting and I could not find anyone to tend my child. I solved the problem by putting molasses on her fingers and giving her a feather. That kept her busy and quiet while I attended to business.

We require high standards for membership in our club, inviting only the city's finest musicians to join. I am proud of them. On one occasion when Mame Graves Atkins reported in the newspaper that one of our singers sang flat, I immediately rang her up, and said, "Young lady, where did you receive your training? A Mendelssohn Club member never sings off pitch."

Our club grew and gained national attention. Some say it was because I had important musical friends in the country. When we outgrew homes for musicales, Court Street Methodist Church granted us space. Now we have our own rooms at 317 Mulberry Street. I am envious of Jesse Spafford's Women's Club building on Park Avenue. Oh, if Mendelssohn Club could only have its own building ....

As the president of Mendelssohn Club, I always introduce our concerts. Some say I talk too long, but I have much to teach the audiences. We've scheduled performers such as Rockford native Frank LaForge, a pianist, composer and teacher as well as other notables. On one occasion, violinist Fritz Kreisler disturbed me. In gratitude for his wonderful concert, I had presented a large spray of roses to him. He placed them on the piano. Then he dashed off to get his train and left the bouquet. Lily Pons was delightful; and oh my -- Horowitz. But this is not to detract from our own Mendelssohn Club members. Why I would give up a New York vacation at the Waldorf Astoria if I could attend a Mendelssohn Club event.

Our Youth Club thrives. I remember little Irene Rutherford who played the piano so well. I think she was in awe of me. She married that nice Ralph Glasford recently. I hope she keeps playing her piano.

Our immediate family consisted of a lovely daughter Norma, our son-in-law William Miller and two adorable grandsons. The extended family would come to our home on Summer Street for Thanksgiving feasts. After dinner, we'd roll up the living-room rug and everyone would dance the Virginia Reel. Even little John Howard joined in.

To accomplish greatness, you need planning, firmness and complete devotion. Some say I would have made a fine General if I had been a man. I hope Mendelssohn Club will keep its high musical standards in the future. And yes, with Mendelssohn Club leading the way, Rockford could become a MUSIC GIANT.



Blanche Ellis Starr, left;  
Courtesy, Mendelssohn Club



Lois D. Peterson, interpreter, right  
Courtesy, Peggy Jensen



## FROM A WOMAN'S POINT OF VIEW

by

Lori Whitman

Sometimes, when things look like they're going from bad to worse, people search for a light at the end of the tunnel. They often find that light in an unusual place: history. With that in mind, I have a secret to share with you.

First, however, I'll tell you something about myself. I'm Laura Potter Gregory. I was born in Rockford in our home on Oak Street in 1858. My parents, the Reverend Joel Potter and Adeline Lathrop Potter, had come to Rockford from New York in 1839. I went to Rockford schools and Wellesley College. My family was active in Westminster Presbyterian Church, then located on the west side. I conducted a Bible class for women; my husband Edward was a church trustee.

In 1889, I married Edward Gregory, the son of Louis B. and Lucy Spafford Gregory. Perhaps you've heard of them. They were involved in Rockford's growth. My husband Edward was in the plumbing and pipefitting business until he died in 1911. He was a member of the City Council during 1884. We lived on Harlem Boulevard near Auburn Street.

I saw a lot of potential in Rockford, especially for women. I belonged to many community organizations: Daughters of the American Revolution, Ladies Union Aid Society, Rockford Woman's Club (board of directors member for many years), Young Women's Christian Association (I played a part in the building of the facility on South Madison Street), and the Outlook Club.

I was the first president of the Outlook Club, whose purpose was to study for personal improvement and for development of a just and broad-minded attitude toward the future. Rather progressive for our day! We devoted our initial two years (1892-93) to American intellectual development as depicted in newspapers and periodicals, in colleges, in oratory, in literature and in statesmanship. English drama occupied our third year followed by three years studying the Renaissance and Reformation periods in Italy, Germany and France. Next we tackled Russia, past and present, and so on. The Outlook Club disbanded in 1992.

But my secret involves another organization. As a member of the Rockford School Board for several terms, beginning circa 1905, I served as Chairman of the Teacher's Committee. I was responsible for initiating the practice of personally interviewing each teacher applicant. I also kept in touch with them.

Teachers then didn't earn much--typically about \$300-\$500 per year. Superintendents and principals earned \$2500. We built the new John Nelson School in 1907 for \$42,500. Lockers for the high school cost \$2.25 each. We paid \$11.50 for a gross of inkwells. And in 1907, when the school lunch program started, students paid no more than five cents per item. The district's entire 1907 budget--for salaries, building upkeep, utilities, everything for about 20 schools--totaled \$150,000. Compare that to 1993's about \$162.5 million.

We had problems, though. Some parents complained that their children weren't safe in school. Petitions were filed and a lawsuit was brought against the district in 1913. I wanted you to know that the district had legal problems then too.

In May 1913, our long-time superintendent P. R. Walker died.

We appointed his daughter Frances acting superintendent. I'd like to share a portion of a letter she wrote to the school board.

Sometimes when things run along so smoothly for a long time, we are apt to lose sight of the thoughtful planning, the tact, the judgment, the alertness, the kindness of spirit back of it all which keeps the machinery in order. It is only when jars and discords occur that we appreciate the quietly running days.

To have united two sides of a divided City; to have guided the schools safely through political and religious and civic disturbances; to have the good will of hundreds of teachers through many years of daily contact; and of thousands of children, young people and citizens; to have had one's advice sought continually by educators throughout the State and Nation; and finally to fall asleep peacefully in the springtime when still in the vigor of work, that is something of a record of the man who so faithfully fulfilled the trust you placed in him.

So as the years pass, I hope that your affection for him will deepen, and that his influence in your lives will strengthen you in all your efforts toward the truth.

I remembered that letter particularly because of references to the "divided City" and political, religious and civic disturbances that the school district overcame. And that's my secret. There may be a great blessing in the fact that history repeats itself. In the early 1900s P. R. Walker made great strides toward remedying school problems. Let's hope that that part of history can be repeated again.

NUGGETS OF HISTORY is usually published quarterly by the Rockford Historical Society, 806 Lundvall Avenue, Rockford, Illinois 61107.

Statement of purpose: To enlighten and to educate people about their place of residence, to entertain with stories and fact, and to enrich lives regarding what is available to enjoy, to treasure and to honor.

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We welcome manuscripts, related to area historical events and personalities, for consideration. For return, include a self-addressed stamped envelope. Send to:

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