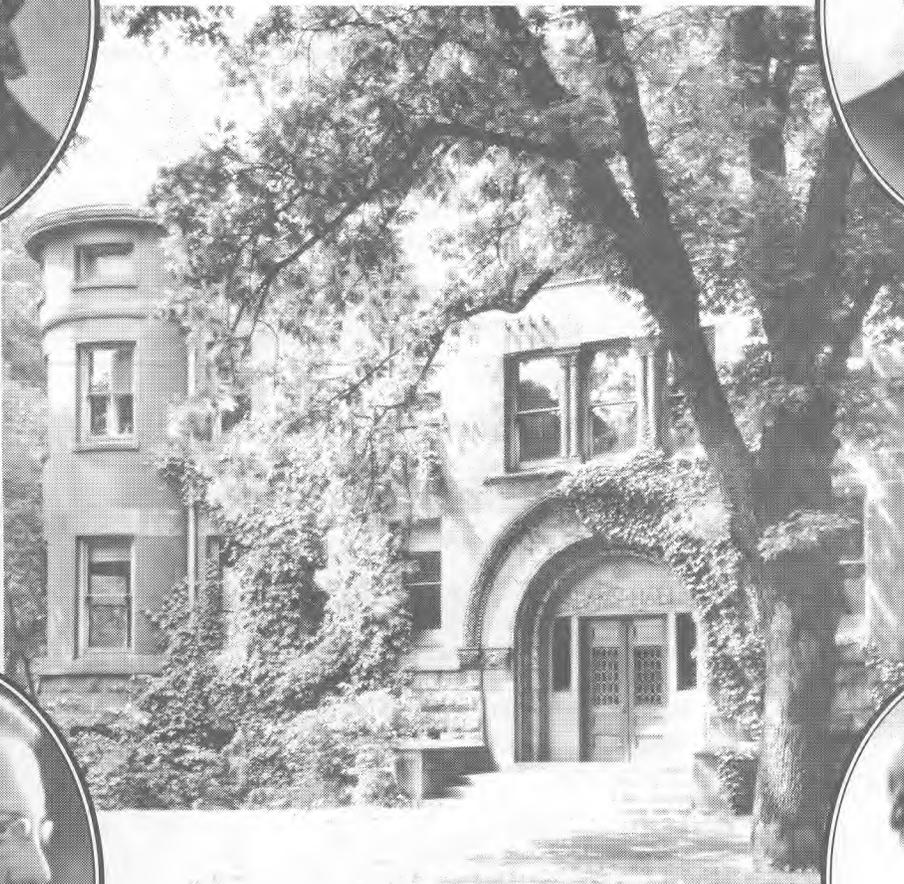

NUGGETS OF HISTORY

VOLUME 37 SEPTEMBER 1998 NUMBER 3

ROCKFORD COLLEGE PRESIDENTS AND A 1920S BUSINESS WOMAN



*Center, Adams Hall on original campus.
Clockwise from upper left: Anna Peck Sill, Martha Hilliard,
William Arthur Maddox, Mary Ashby Cheek
Photos courtesy, Rockford College Archives*

FROM AN EDITOR'S DESK

This issue presents an historical account of Rockford College presidents as researched by current President William A. Shields. He graciously consented to publication of an edited version of a speech given March 1, 1998, at the spring dinner meeting of the Rockford Historical Society. Dr. Shields, a native of Montana received a B.A. degree in sociology, "Magna Cum Laude," for Carroll College in Helena. He earned both a Masters and a Ph.D. in sociology from the University of Pittsburgh. He defended his dissertation "with distinction."

Dr. Shields has held teaching positions at the University of Pittsburgh, Penn State University, Idaho State University and Carnegie Institute of Technology. Prior to his 1992 coming to Rockford College, he had served for 15 years as president of The College of Great Falls, Montana.

He and his wife Judy have four children: Colleen, Maura, Patrick and Michael.

Our second feature concerns a pioneering event in women's history. Florence Bergenson Wall assumed the office of Secretary-Treasurer at Continental Desk Company in 1924. She succeeded her husband Nels, who had died an untimely death that year. Their daughter Eleanor, a Rockford resident married to 5th-generation Rockfordian Richard Marsh, shares the story of her mother's success in a then male-dominated business world.

With regret, I'm announcing that this will be the final 1998 issue. Instead of the usual four, I'll publish only three.

Peggy Jensen, Editor

HISTORICAL SOCIETY CALENDAR

FALL TOUR OF ROCKFORD, SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 26, 1998

DESTINATIONS

DRIVE BY COBBLESTONE HOUSE

TOURS: ERLANDER HOME, ETHNIC HERITAGE MUSEUM,
GRAHAM/GINESTRA HOME, TINKER SWISS COTTAGE AND
CORONADO THEATER.

BOX LUNCH AT KLEHM ARBORETUM.

DEPART/RETURN TO HIGHCREST CENTER.

8:30 A.M.- 5:00 P.M.

COST: approximately \$32, if 45 participate.

For last minute reservations: 963-6019

**ROCKFORD COLLEGE PRESIDENTS
and
DISTINGUISHED ALUMNAE
1847-1982**

by

Current President Dr. William Shields

Rockford Female Seminary, later to be named Rockford Seminary and still later, Rockford College, was chartered on February 25, 1847. Authorized by the State of Illinois, the charter stated that the purpose of the institution would be "to afford instruction in the liberal arts and sciences adapted to the highest order of female education." With the exception of one word, *female*, the college's mission has remained the same to this day. In December 1997, the Board of Trustees unanimously reaffirmed the liberal arts mission.

FOUNDERS

A group of Congregationalists, among them Rockford founder Aratus Kent, had petitioned for the charter. A year earlier the same group had established Beloit College. It was intended to be the men's college; Rockford Female Seminary, the women's institution.

**TIES WITH SECOND CONGREGATIONAL
CHURCH**

Today, Rockford College has no particular religious affiliation. Over the years, however, there has been an informal relationship between the college and Second Congregational Church. Two former pastors, the Rev. Joseph Cleveland and the Rev. Dean Dalrymple, served as college chaplains. During 1933-34, Pastor John Gordon served as acting college president. Commencement exercises were frequently held at Second Congregational Church. Members of that church have served as college trustees.

SIGNIFICANT INDIVIDUALS

If the history and character of an institution are shaped and nurtured by individuals associated with it, this is true of Rockford College. Numerous individuals have made their

presence known. Their legacy endures. The following women were not only recognized scholars in their own right, but all were authentic examples of educated women rising to any heights.

ALUMNA ADDAMS

Jane Addams, our most illustrious alumna, received the college's first collegiate degree, 1882. She founded Chicago's Hull House and received the 1931 Nobel Peace Laureate. She's considered as one of two most influential women of the 20th century, and is the only American woman to be listed as a figure of the millennium.

FACULTY GIANTS

Dr. Frances Johnson, nuclear physicist, associate of Enrico Fermi, participant in the Manhattan Project, and architect of the college's natural science program.

Dr. Mary Bragington, scholar and sailor, professor of classics, academic dean and acting president; a founder of the Illinois Classical Conference, and a driving force in establishing the college's chapters of Phi Beta Kappa and

the Association of University Professors.

Dr. Ruth Caven, nationally renowned sociologist and noted authority on the study of suicide; founder of the college's social science program.

Dr. Mildred Berry, Professor of Speech. Nationally renowned for research and writing in speech and speech pathology. She was a delegate to the Paris Peace Conference which ended the VietNam War.

PRESIDENTS

Besides alumna and faculty, presidents have left their mark as they touched the life of Rockford College.

ANNA P. SILL

Consider the tenure of the first president, or principal as the position was known then. **Anna P. Sill**, a young, single school teacher from New England possessed a puritan missionary background. The founders had summoned her to the wilds of Northern Illinois to head the school. They hired her in 1849 for a salary of \$200 plus board and room.

When she arrived, however, she had no school and it was not certain if Rockford would be the seminary's site. Yet, Sill persisted in her mission to advance the education of young women. While waiting for the board to make decisions, she began classes for grade-school girls in the abandoned courthouse on N. First Street.

Sill was determined that this school should become an institution of higher education, not another school for children. Having resolved their differences as to location, and impressed with Sill's accomplishments, the trustees conferred the seminary charter. Classes began in 1852.

Tall, intense, and majestic in manner, Sill used her persuasive ability. She gathered financial and spiritual support not only in Rockford but also during fund-raising trips to New England. Behind her power was a dedication to the education of young women. And behind that dedication, her puritan background as a source of intensity, strength and motivation. She set the course of the early years. When she

resigned in 1884, the school had five buildings and 300 students.

MARTHA HILLIARD

Martha Hilliard, a Vassar graduate and faculty member, succeeded Sill. The tie between elite eastern women's schools and Rockford College would become a recurring theme. More flexible and worldly than Sill, Hilliard instigated innovations. She changed the atmosphere from constant surveillance and espionage to trust and openness. She established the honor code. It remains an integral part today.

Under Hilliard's guidance, the school moved from seminary to college status. She introduced P.E. into the curriculum, a revolutionary idea for a women's school then. She also insisted that students should be provided with "the opportunity of wholesome intercourse with young men." She invited Beloit College senior class members to evening receptions in Rockford.

If Sill's imprint on the college was discipline and stability, that of Hilliard was curricular development and

academic quality. Under her guidance, the college's traditional liberal arts emphasis was established.

Hilliard served only four years. She left to marry Andrew McLeish. Their son, Archibald, became a noted writer and poet. Later Hilliard would serve as a college trustee. At age 90, she gave the keynote speech at the centennial celebration.

FIVE OTHER WOMEN

Next, five more women would succeed to the college presidency. They not only continued the course set by Sill and Hilliard, but also maintained the connection with seven sister institutions in the East. This group included the first alumna and the first faculty member to succeed to the presidency: **Sarah Anderson**, 1890-96, and **Phebe Sutliff**, 1896-1901.

Julia Gulliver, the last of this group of women, served for nearly 18 years. Next to that of Sill, she held the longest presidential tenure. Gulliver, the most highly-credentialed of this early group (B.A., M.A.,

Ph.D. and L.L.D.), is better known for faculty revolt.

It centered around a sex scandal involving a male faculty member. Gulliver wanted to keep the incident secret. Some faculty members wanted the veil of secrecy lifted. Open conflict ensued. The entire faculty threatened to quit if Gulliver did not step down. She did. The era of the first seven presidents ended. Unique, each individual was the "right person in the right place." Each had a profound effect on Rockford College.

MEN AS PRESIDENTS

Three men would assume the president's office between 1919 and 1937. **William Arthur Maddox**, the first, served from 1919 - 1933. Aware of the prior situation under Gulliver, he accepted the office on the condition that the entire faculty would resign. Then he hired new faculty members. Successful in his efforts, he's credited with increasing the quality and diversity of the faculty.

During Maddox's tenure, he

instigated daily chapel gatherings for faculty, staff, students and the general public. Chapel events grew in popularity and significance as they developed into forums for academic discourse and debate. They served as forerunners of convocations and forum presentations open to the public.

Believing that the college depended upon community goodwill, Maddox emphasized outreach to the city. Saying, "It pays to advertize," he praised the college and showed its importance to Rockford both financially and culturally in talks before city groups. He constantly sought ways for the college to offer services to the community.

A tragic car/train accident near Davis Junction, August 10, 1933, ended Maddox's life and his presidential term.

Then **John Gordon** served as acting president until **Dr. Gordon Chalmers** assumed the office in 1934. He served less than three years, resigning to accept the presidency of Kenyon College, Gambier, Ohio.

MARY ASHBY CHEEK

Next, **Mary Ashby Cheek**, from Mount Holyoke College, succeeded to the office in 1937. She became one of the most admired and beloved of all Rockford College presidents.

Arriving in the midst of the Great Depression, Cheek inherited an institution characterized by falling enrollments and a worrisome financial condition. Under her leadership, however, the college prospered.

Combining the scholarly stature and the community focus of Maddox with her personal grace and diplomacy, she led the college into a golden age. Through persistence and effective appeals to supporters both locally and nationally, she turned the financial situation around. She also upgraded and added to the physical plant with construction of new buildings including Talcott Hall and the Sherret Library.

Her lasting legacies during her 17 year term of office, however, were the institutional structures and policies she put

in place. She established the Phi Beta Kappa chapter.

She fostered the establishment of an American Association of University Professors chapter and outlined a procedure whereby faculty evaluation, promotion and tenure would follow AAUP guidelines. Under her leadership, the system of faculty governance and collegial decision-making was put in place. She also established the Board of Counselors and the Alumnae Annual Fund.

Next, following a brief term by **Leland Carlson** and interim presidencies of **Mary Bragington** and **Louis Gibbs**, **Dr. John Howard** assumed the presidency.

DR. JOHN HOWARD

Howard became president in 1960 and served until 1977. During his tenure, the college experienced a five-year period of transition. The campus was moved from the banks of the Rock River to 300 acres of East State Street cornfields. No longer an intimate physical space, now 17 buildings spread over several acres. A modern campus, with up-

to-date facilities and amenities, it suited both faculty and students.

Additionally, while the college had been officially co-ed since 1955, now males were full-time, residential students.

A change in philosophy also took place. It did not modify the liberal arts focus, but it modified how the college "did business." In the name of academic freedom and independence, the college refused to accept federal or state money either as institutional support or as student aid. This stance appealed to donors and supporters who admired Howard for his courage of conviction, his vision, and his formidable persuasive abilities.

Howard resigned in 1977 to devote full attention to the Rockford Institute. His legacy to the college includes a magnificent physical plant, a beautiful campus, and a core of highly-qualified faculty members, many of whom came during Dr. Howard's presidency.



DR.NORMAN STEWART

Another significant transition occurred during **Dr. Norman Stewart's** presidency, 1979-87. The college acquired a branch campus in London known as Regent's College. It seemed an excellent idea to provide students with an international experience. For a variety of reasons, however, the decision to establish such a campus resulted in financial drain and ultimately to Stewart's resignation.

DR.GRETCHEN KREUTER

Following Stewart's departure and the interim presidency of **Gerald Broski, Dr. Gretchen Kreuter** became the 14th president. A member of the class of 1956, Kreuter was the ninth woman and the second alumna to hold the position. A formidable task faced her: declining enrollments, faculty dissension, alumni disillusionment, community uncertainty, and a precarious financial situation. Having done all she could under the circumstances, in 1992 Kreuter resigned as president.



Here ends my chronicle of presidential impact on Rockford College history. I refrain from speculating on the effect and significance of the current administration, a work still in progress.

I conclude with a quotation from Anna P. Sill.

I remember when Rockford Seminary was only a deep, keen-felt aspiration--only a fervent prayer. The future! Who can lift the veil? God has so wisely, so beautifully mingled the contingent with the certain in human affairs as to lead us both to action and to trust.

Throughout its history, Rockford College has benefited from a great deal of action and trust.

Dr. Shield's sources: Rockford College Archives and "Rockford College: A Retrospective Look."

Note: In recognition of its 150th anniversary, Rockford College ended a year-long celebration in late February 1998. At a Charter Day Convocation the college honored significant individual contributors: Janet Colman, class of 1937; Professor Philip Dedrick, former art faculty member; and ex-president Dr. John Howard.



Nels Wall
1879-1924

A WOMAN OF DISTINCTION

by

Eleanor Wall Marsh as told to Peggy Jensen



Florence Wall
1890-1975

Nels Wall, Secretary/Treasurer of Rockford's Continental Desk Company, died in 1924 at age 45. His widow Florence (12 years younger than Nels) and two daughters--two-and-one-half-year-old Eleanor and six weeks-old Ruthmary--survived him. .

A 1920s WOMAN EXECUTIVE

In 1924, few women entered the business world as executives. Yet Florence assumed not only her late husband's position at the desk company, but also his investments. The factory stood at the corner of Cedar Street and Rockton Avenue.

NELS WALL

Nels' family had arrived in Rockford from Sweden when Nels was four years old. Like other Swedish immigrants, Nels found employment in furniture manufacturies. Prior to establishing Continental Desk Company, he had gained experience in administrative positions at Royal Mantel and Furniture Company, Rockford Desk Company, and the Illinois

School Furniture Company.

CONTINENTAL DESK COMPANY

In 1917, he and his brother Martin, together with an uncle, D. R. Peterson, formed Continental Desk Company. Peterson was president; Martin, vice-president, and Nels, secretary/treasurer. The firm manufactured cedar chests and small cabinets. Upon Peterson's death, Martin became president and Hugo Peterson (no relation to D.R.) became vice-president. As such, he supervised shop manufacturing.

FLORENCE WALL

When Florence Bergenson Wall took over her late husband's position, she had already acquired business experience. A graduate of Rockford Business College, she had worked at Mechanics Furniture Company. During her 18-year association with the firm, she handled financial aspects. Twice a year, she would travel to the Furniture Mart at Chicago's Merchandise Mart to receive

orders for the company's products.

MOTHER/DAUGHTER RELATIONSHIPS

Eleanor Wall Marsh remembers life as a career woman's daughter. She especially recalls trips to meet her mother in Chicago during Furniture Mart events. Grandmother Bergenson and Uncle Frank Bergenson, who lived with the family, would put Eleanor and Ruthmary on the Illinois Central train to Chicago on a Saturday morning.

"Mother would meet us at the railway station and we would spend the weekend together," says Eleanor. "She'd take us to the Field Museum, the Art Institute, Chicago Symphony concerts, and plays at the

Shubert Theater."

To cap the weekend, mother and daughters would enjoy meals at elegant restaurants such as LaPetite and Gripsholm Slott.

Other occasions for interaction with their business woman mother occurred weekdays after school. Eleanor and Ruthmary would go to the Continental office by bus from Lincoln Junior High School. "We'd file, add columns of figures using adding machines, and type bills of lading to include in shipments," she says.

"That's how we spent time with a mother who, of necessity, assumed the father role while Grandmother fulfilled the mother role."

As told to Peggy Jensen by Eleanor Marsh.



Secretary-treasurer Florence Wall of Continental Desk Company poses at her desk with employees Ruth Sanden Storm (left) and Kitty Peters (right).

NUGGETS OF HISTORY, is published quarterly by the Rockford Historical Society, 806 Lundvall Avenue, Rockford, Illinois, 61107. Society members receive NUGGETS upon payment of annual dues. New rates, effective January 1, 1998: Family @ \$15, Individual @ \$10, Contributing member @ \$25, Life member @ \$150. Mail check to: Membership Chairman, Rockford Historical Society, 6799 Guilford Rd., Rockford IL 61107.

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