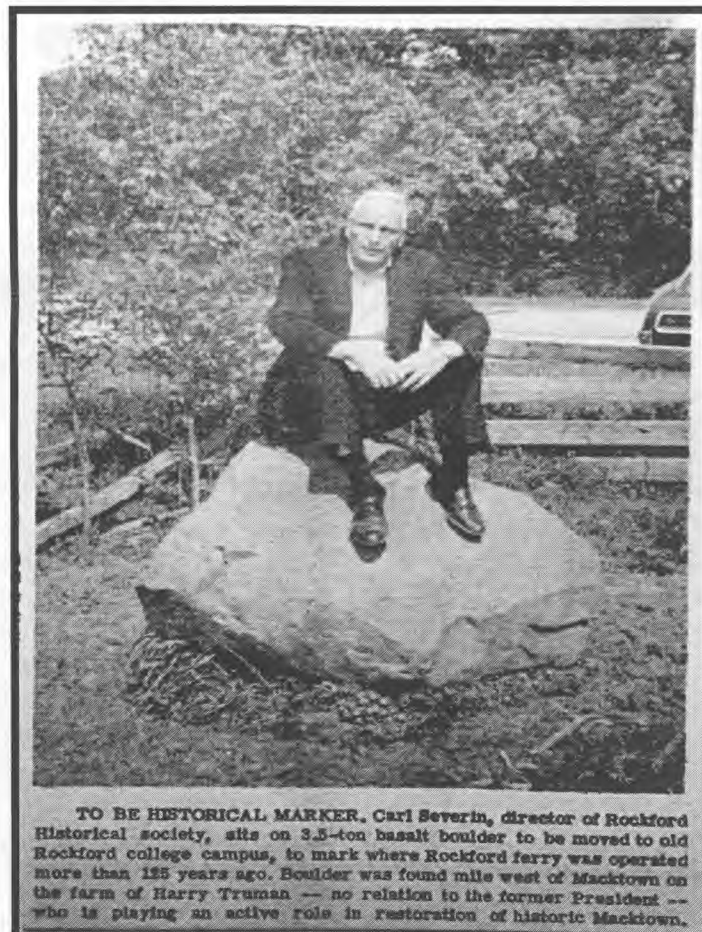

NUGGETS OF HISTORY

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THE ROCK THAT MARKS THE FORD

By Carol J. Fox



Carl Severin sits atop the boulder that became the historical marker for the Rockford Ford. The marker, dedicated in 1965, is on the west side of the Rock River at the dam. The picture's caption does not reflect what actually took place.

FROM THE EDITOR'S DESK

A native Illinoisan, Carol J. Fox has lived in the Rockford area since 1971. She is a retired librarian who has worked in school libraries for the most part, but had a stint as a Consultant at the Illinois State Library for five years and as a reading consultant for another five. She taught children's literature at Rockford University for a decade and has written a series of books on using children's literature in the classroom. She has written articles for state and national library and reading publications and writes poetry when inspiration reaches her. She has always been interested in local history and is researching Rockford public school sites built before 1950 and historical markers in the Rockford area. She was recently recognized by the Graduate School of Library and Information at the University of Rhode Island (her alma mater) as one of the fifty most distinguished alumni of the past fifty years. Carol is currently serving as Vice-President of the Rockford Historical Society Board of Directors. She is married and has one daughter, one son-in-law and two young granddaughters. This is her first article for *Nuggets of History*.

LOOKING FOR INFORMATION

Amanda Becker, who has written two excellent articles on the Rockford Driving Park is looking for any information about the Driving Park, particularly pictures! If anyone has any information or pictures that you would be willing to share, please contact me at 815/986-4867 or powersthomas@gmail.com and I will pass it on to Amanda.

NOTICE TO RESEARCHERS

If you have a subject that you have researched, or an idea for an article that you would like to pursue, give me a call. I would like to encourage original research into some aspects of local history that have not been adequately pursued. I can be reached at 815/986-4867 (evenings) or 987-5724 (day).

Thomas Powers, Editor

HISTORY FAIR

Don't forget the History Fair at Midway Village on January 18th.

THE ROCK THAT MARKS THE FORD

By

Carol J. Fox

Down a length of abandoned railroad track, about fifteen feet from Fordham Dam on the west shore of Rock River is a two and a half ton igneous rock boulder. It found its way from eastern Canada to Winnebago County in the Pre-Illinoian (Glacial) Stage, some 200,000 years ago, (Malmberg, 1968) landing on what became the Frank Truman farm on Illinois Rt. 75. In 1964, Truman donated the rock for the dam site to mark a historic spot in Rockford history.



Figure 1. The dam at Rockford lies on the ford. This picture from the late '60s shows the dam and two railroad bridges. The forward bridge is Chicago, Burlington and Quincy Bridge. The donut shape on the left where the dam and the railroad bridge appear to meet marks the approximate spot of the rock that commemorates the location of the ford. The ford which spanned the river was a solid rock bed, used by Native Americans and pioneers to cross the Rock River. The ford became the rock foundation of the dam which has been in this location since 1853. Photo from cover of *Sinissippi Saga* (Nelson, 1968). Circle added.

The rock marks the ford across the Rock River where people, animals, and any vehicles used for transportation crossed the river until 1845 when the first bridge across Rock River at Rockford was built. (See **Figures 1.&2.**) Yes, there was a ferry begun in 1837 by Germanicus Kent, but the ford was the cheapest way to get significant cargo across the river. The ford was said to have a solid rock bottom, the water no more than two to two and a half feet deep across the river in normal water stage. (Church, 1900)

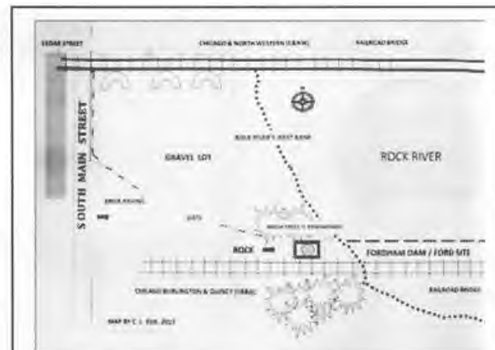


Figure 2. The sketch above (not to scale) is a rough map of the location of the Rockford Ford Memorial Rock. Sketch by C. J. Fox, 2013

The ford and the dam that was built upon it are the foundation of Rockford's growth as a city. Because of the ford, and later, the dam which generated hydraulic and then hydro-electric power, Rockford grew from a pioneer settlement to an important industrial city known worldwide for its manufactured goods. However, the dam was being used less and less as a source of power by the 1950s. (Detra, 1963)

It was reasonable to commemorate the spot. The memorial boulder was put in place in 1965 by a joint committee of the Swedish Historical Society of Rockford and the Rockford Historical Society (RHS). The boulder is still there today. It once had a bronze plaque. The cement mount below it bears the outline of what looks like a covered wagon from another bronze plaque. Faintly etched below the wagon outline is the date 1964. The actual date and time of the dedication was 4:00 p.m., October 29, 1965 (*Archival Notebook #1*, p. 136-138).

HOW THE MEMORIAL ROCK CAME TO BE

Carl Severin (1894-1975) was the leading figure behind the endeavor to mark the ford location. A superintendent with Rockford Products for nearly 30 years, he retired in 1958 and began an earnest concentration on local and Swedish histories, lifelong interests of his. Severin emigrated from Gothenburg, Sweden. He was proud of both his Swedish heritage and his new homeland. He was an active member of the Swedish Historical Society and helped establish the Erlander House but knew that his adopted Rockford was a mix of multiple cultures and felt that the history of all should be preserved. Others in the Swedish Historical Society felt the same way. Leaders from the Swedish Historical Society incorporated the Rockford Historical Society in 1961. Thus the Rockford Historical Society is an outgrowth of the Swedish Historical Society of Rockford.

In 1959, Severin, a member of the Swedish Historical Society, later its president, and a charter member for the new Rockford Historical Society, wrote a report to the Swedish Historical Society detailing the history of the ford.



Figure 3. This is a prototype drawing for the ford memorial marker. Undated and unsigned. Drawing is part of the *Archival Notebook* #1, p. 99. Minutes of the Marker Committee meeting are dated 9/4/64. Photo by C. J. Fox, 2013.

This report, read at the Rockford Historical Society meeting on January 27, 1963 is reprinted below. Hearing Mr. Severin's voice in this document makes it exceptional reading. My independent study, half a century later, of the history of the dam and ford produced much the same information. I corrected two typographical errors.

Figure 4: Carl Severin's Report on the History of the Ford and the Fordham Dam. (*Archival Notebook* #1, p. 39)

Report to the Swedish Historical Society, Rockford, Illinois in Regard to Placing a Historical Marker for the Ford at Rock River

Reminiscences by John H. Thurston, published in 1891 by press of the Daily Republican is used mostly for this report. John H. Thurston left from Troy, New York with his father on February 1, 1837. He arrived in Rockford the 12th day of March, 1837. He was then 13 years of age. He died in 1896. It would be fine if the Swedish Historical Society could secure a copy of this book.

The ford played an important part in the early history of the white settlers, giving the name to the Rock River, and to our city. It had served the Indians as a river crossing for generations. Their trails ran North and South, East and West from the ford.

The first wagon trail to the ford wound through the south half of block 15, down Walnut Street to the river bottoms, then south to the ford and entered the river where the present dam strikes the bank. On the opposite side, it left the river 200 feet to the south. The rock was flat as a floor and did not vary in depth over five inches. The water went up to the front axles of the wagons.

The history of the ford is tied in with the history of the first ferry, the first bridge and the first dam across the river, so we will mention them to some extent.

The first ferry was built in 1836 by Germanus [sic]¹ Kent. It operated where State Street crosses the river. They used skiffs for passengers and scows for wagons and livestock. The ferry operated from 1836 until 1844 when the first bridge was built. The ford was still serving as a crossing during this time on until 1845-46. It was a common sight to see the prairie schooners or covered wagons going west with the family in the schooner, followed by the livestock. Even the sheep and hogs were herded across the ford and the tired farmer on horseback following up to see that nothing was lost.

The first bridge was built on State Street in 1844-45. No steel or bolts were used. Only wood pins were used to hold it together. It was badly damaged in 1846 and 1847 when the dam broke. Each time it was repaired and almost ruined beyond repair in 1851 when the dam went out altogether. The bridge was repaired again and held until 1854 when a covered bridge was built. The ford was a good standby in those days.

The first dam was built on sand or gravel bottom North of Jefferson Street across from the Water Works. It was built from timber and earth fill in 1845. It broke in 1846 on the west side, and in 1847 on the east side, and went out altogether in 1851. If this first dam would have held against the floods, maybe the ford would still be used.

The ford was used until 1845-46 when a new type of traffic came in to use, namely the steam boat. Promoters for steam boat traffic got leins [*sic*] passed to collect taxes to make Rock River suitable for boat traffic. That year they built a coffer dam 50 feet wide over the ford, and the rapids, and work was started to dig a channel, but it ruined the ford as a crossing for livestock or wagons.

A new dam was built on the ford in 1852-53. It was built on the ford on the east side right across the river. The dam was rebuilt in 1904 and 1910 right on the ford's solid rock for it's [*sic*] foundation.

There was a Ford Street on the west side going to the ford. This was given to the C B & Q Railroad for a right-of-way. The footings of the railroad bridge are on the ford on the west side.

The Ford Street on the east side was given to the Chicago Galena [Union] Railroad and the [Chicago &] Northwestern [Railroad]. Near the river, the east end of their bridge has its footings on the ford on the east side. So, the ford is now used for footings for two railroad bridges, and the present dam.

At first our city was known as The Ford or Rockie Ford. When the Chicago-Galena stage route was established, it [the town] was called Midway, being halfway between Chicago and Galena. In the summer of 1835, a group of men met to give our city its name. A Mr. Godhouse [*sic*]² suggested we call it Rockford from the Rockie Ford in the river, so the ford really gave our city its name.

It appears that Burson Knitting Co. on the west, and Central Illinois Electric & Gas Co. on the east side own the property next to the ford, and maybe the railway companies. We should ask for their co-operation to help us to get ground suitable to place a marker. We feel that the ford has a remarkable history and is of interest to our community and it would be proper and timely to have an historical marker placed by the ford.

On this committee we should have members from Burson Knitting Co., Central Illinois Electric & Gas Co., Board of Education, The Park Board, and the new Rockford Area Historical Society.

CES:bes

¹Germanicus

²Goodhue

Respectfully submitted,

Carl E. Severin

11-9-1959

In previous months, Severin had investigated where the ford was located and determined that the river at the dam was the place where the ford had been. As Mr. Severin related, Rockford has had two dam sites. The first dam across the Rock River in Rockford is most often said to have been roughly where the Water Works was located, between the library and Beatty Park. The dam was built at approximately the same time as the first bridge in 1846. The first dam went out three times and each time destroyed or nearly destroyed the first bridge and businesses using its power.

In September, 1851, the owners of the water and land of the old company (Rockford Hydraulic and Manufacturing Co. -- 1st dam) entered into an agreement with the new company (Rockford Water Power Company -- 2nd dam), whereby the two interests were consolidated; steps were immediately taken for the construction of a permanent dam on the rock bottom of the old ford, from which the city derived its name. (Parenthetical information is mine.) (Church, 1900)

Once the ford site was identified with surety, Severin, spearheading a joint committee of both the Rockford Historical Society and the Swedish Historical Society of Rockford, went about the task of placing the marker. The two societies each budgeted \$300.00 for the placement of the marker. Because so much of the work and material was donated the actual cost of the marker was estimated by Mr. Severin to be about \$90.00.

The following activities regarding the marker were recorded in the minutes of the Rockford Historical Society and preserved in the *Archival Notebook #1* on various pages between January, 1963 and October, 1965.

- **Securing a spot for the marker** (The property next to the railroad track was owned by Stanley B. Valuilis who gave the societies permission to place a rock on the property). One newspaper account implies the land was donated, but the RHS minutes say only that Mr. Valuilis granted permission to the two societies to place the rock on the land.
- Access to the marker site crossed C. B. & Q. Railroad property. (Permission to access the site was given by the railroad.) The \$50.00 access fee was waived.
- Preparing the property for the monument (Land fill was provided and placed by the city engineering department through the assistance of the Mayor Ben Schleicher.)
- Having a monument designed (Possibly done by Marshall Dahlgren at the request of Emma Lundgren, but sketches are not signed.) (See **Figure 3.**)
- Finding a rock (A newspaper article appeared asking for a rock; Frank Truman owned it and donated it for the purpose; Frank St. Angel was credited with help in finding the rock.) Who moved the rock from the farm to dam site eluded me. (See **Figure 5.**)
- Having a script created for the wording on the plaque (Each member of the Marker Committee was asked to write plaque wording which would be used to compose the final wording.) (See **Figure 12.**)
- Finding people to make a foundation for the rock (Ragnar G. Levine and the Acme Ready Mix Company donated the material and formed the slab.)
- Up righting the rock (Howard Linden of Linden Industrial Service raised the stone to the correct position on the foundation.)
- Creating the plaque (Henry Olson donated the bronze plaque and placed it on the boulder.)
- Inviting the mayor to attend the dedication ceremony. Mr. Severin met with the mayor. Dedication was planned by Mr. Severin for October 29, 1965. (See **Figure 6.**)

Most of these items and services were donated. This all took time. By June, 1965, the boulder was on a pedestal on the west side of the river at the junction of the Chicago, Burlington and Quincy Railroad and the dam. The rock was on its side and did not yet have the plaque on it (See **Figure 5.**), but the pedestal was inscribed with the date 1964 and had the covered wagon plaque attached to it. The horse drawn wagon plaque was obtained by Severin for the memorial rock from Oscar Swanson, who had had it for more than 30 years. When the inscribed plaque was installed, the rock was tipped up on its end so that a large flat surface would be available to attach the plaque.



Figure 5. The same rock as the one on cover of this article is on its cement pedestal and in place at the ford site.



Figure 6. Rockford Ford Memorial Rock Dedication Ceremony, October 28, 1965. Correction to caption: Left to right: unidentified student (in hat), Carl Severin, unidentified students (in back), Mayor Ben Schleicher, and Harold W. Erickson (Minister of First Evangelical Free Church). Frank Truman, David W. Johnson and Brice Sheets are not pictured.

SINCE THEN...



In August, 1966, less than a year after the memorial was dedicated, vandals tried to pry the rock off its base. (See **Figure 7.**) If they had succeeded, it would have rolled down the embankment into the river. A photo in the Rockford Register on the same date as the photo below shows that both the bronze tablet and the covered wagon were still on the rock. Carl Severin inspected the rock and stated that a derrick or crane would be needed to set it right. This was done and cement was placed around the bottom of the rock to adhere it to the pedestal, perhaps by the same companies who did the original work. Online newspaper archives do not mention the rock again. It disappeared from the spotlight, and was apparently forgotten in the excitement of building a museum center, which was the next activity of the two history societies. At some date, the plaques were stolen or removed. Of course, the rock was not lost and people who live and work along this stretch of Main Street must be aware of it, but it is not in view from Main Street. Since it has no plaque, even those who now see it are unaware of its significance.

The land on which the rock resides, though authentically marking the access to the ford, is in an awkward place. To the north is an embankment, to the south is the railroad track, and to the east are the river, the dam, and the gated and chained C. B. & Q. Railroad Bridge. To the west is a fence. The space for the rock is no more than ten feet in diameter.

Other, larger projects began to interest the historical societies. Carl Severin went on to play a significant role in the development of the Rockford Museum Center and Midway Village. He donated farm land on Guilford Road for the information center for the Museum complex and helped to raise the \$150,000 to build the center. Lake Severin at the entrance to the museum and village is named in his honor. The rock was left on its own. Fortunately, rocks are durable.

FINDING THE ROCK AGAIN

About a year ago, I was asked to serve on the RHS board and given access to records of the early history of the society. To my surprise, I found that Rockford Historical Society in its very early days had jointly mounted an effort with the Swedish Historical Society to commemorate the ford across the Rock River. The ford was one of the reasons Germanicus Kent had chosen this spot to found a town. The ford was not just a good ford, it was an excellent ford. Some said it was a flat slab of rock all the way across the river and that the water did not vary in depth by more than five inches. The water was only two feet deep or a little more during normal water stages, no higher than the front axles of the wagons. This not only made it an excellent ford, but also an excellent site for a dam. The dam is the site of the ford.

I am interested in historical markers and had looked in vain for other ones reported by the state to be in the city. Could there be a marker commemorating the ford? Newspaper archives gave a location and my husband and I drove over to South Main Street at Pine. We found a railroad track and down the track, near the river we found the rock. (See **Figure 8.**) The picture on the right (**Figure 9.**) is of the rock taken in 1968 for *Sinnissippi Saga* (Nelson, 1968). The rock today is worn a bit more, covered with lichen, and missing the beautiful plaques, but it is the same rock in the same location. It has survived both neglect and abuse.



Figure 8. Rockford Ford Historical Marker, Erected 1965. Missing are plaques that identified purpose of the monument. Photo by C. J. Fox, 2013.

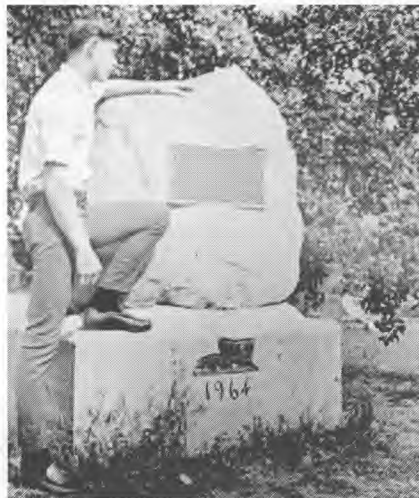


Figure 9. Gary Lindblom examines Rockford Ford Historical Marker c1968. Photo from: *Sinnissippi Saga* (Nelson, 1968)

When the Central Illinois Electric and Gas Company merged with Commonwealth Edison in 1973, the dam and adjacent land for access to the dam became ComEd's property. According to the Winnebago County Supervisor of Assessments, the little slip of land that the rock sits on belongs to ComEd today. The gravel lot to the north of the rock belongs to the city. The land south of the railroad track from Main Street to what is left of the old Race Street belongs to the city. The railroad track and land may still belong to the railroad; it is not listed in the assessments.

The dam was overhauled in 1976 and is no longer used for power; its purpose is flood control and to facilitate conservation and recreation. Those firms that were still using hydroelectric power from the dam in the '70s sold their access rights to ComEd. The rock is still there. It just needs to be marked and re-established as a marker of importance in our history.

While finding the rock sounds easy, there were discrepancies in the historical record that did not make it easy to understand exactly what had happened back in 1963-1965. Thus, I have a little cautionary tale of my own for researchers that I would like to share.

THE PURPLE ROCK WAS A RED HERRING

Will Rogers, the Oklahoma humorist of the '30s, once said, "I only know what I read in the papers." That goes for researchers as well, especially if they have no prior knowledge to contradict what is read. One more piece of the story needs to be told so that others, fifty years from now, will not be confused by the originals records.

On the cover, the original caption for the picture of Carl Severin sitting on the rock states that the rock would be used to mark the ferry and would be placed on the Rockford College campus on the east side of the river across from the knitting mills area in the Water Power District. The Water Power District is defined as bounded by the river on the east, Main Street on the west, Kent Creek to the south and the Northwestern Railroad track to the north. (Supplement, January 25, 1977). The articles below (See **Figure 10**) give detail, most of which does not match the rest of the historical and archival material. Most of the archival materials indicate a *rock* marking the *ford* at the *dam* was placed on the *west bank* of the river. Indeed, this is the rock that we located. But the articles below state that a rock marking the ferry was to be placed on the site of the old Rockford College campus. Two rocks? That's what it looked like. So I began to look for a second rock. I knew by this time that Ash Johnson was a newspaperman and a highly

respected member of the Rockford Historical Society, not to mention the founding editor of *Nuggets of History*. If he said there was another rock, there must be another rock, was my thinking.

My husband and I walked the grounds of the old Rockford College campus, in particular, the land along the bluff, no rock. We walked the distance from State Street to the under-construction Morgan Street Bridge along the river bank and the under-demolition C. B. & Q. railroad tracks, no rock. I called and asked Mary Prior, archivist at Rockford College (it wasn't a university yet) to check the college records between 1960 and 1965 for any record of a rock being placed at the old college or being moved to the new campus. There was no record in the meetings of the college leadership. She even spoke to the building and grounds department. Rockford University (RU) does have large rocks on its campus. Some are painted purple. The building and grounds department thought perhaps one of these rocks could have been moved from the old campus. But there was no documentation. Still, where else would a second rock be? My friend Gail Zahm and I went to the college armed with the picture of Mr. Severin sitting on the rock.



We found a rock (See Figure 11) that could be a second rock. . .

But, something wasn't right. No documentation, no recognition by the college that a rock had been placed on the old campus to mark the ferry. No dedication of this rock in the minutes of RHS. No mention of the ferry in any newspaper records that were in electronic databases. The only mention was in articles published in *The POST*, the Loves Park newspaper for which Ash Johnson worked at the time. These articles were carefully preserved in the *RHS Archival Notebook #1*. However, the original ferry was not even at the old college campus site. The ferry was at State Street and the river. And the rock that is said in the photo caption to be destined for the ferry marker is the same rock as the one that marks the ford today. It began to dawn on me that perhaps someone had confused the two sites. The only mention of the ferry were published in *The POST* and written by Ash Johnson.

Ash Johnson was a highly respected and well-liked Rockford newspaperman. He was also quite ill at this time. He died in December, 1965, less than six weeks after the rock was dedicated. He must have wanted to give the rock story a boost in his paper but may not have actually written the articles. No one quibbled that the story presented in *The POST* was not quite the one that was happening. The articles were glued into the archival record with the others. Just before he died, Mr. Johnson was made honorary president of the Rockford Historical Society.

It appears, however, that the only place where a rock to mark the ferry was mentioned was in articles attributed to Mr. Johnson. So the purple rock at Rockford University was a "red herring" for this researcher and it took some time before it struck me what had probably happened. There was no second rock.

I tell this incident only to show how difficult it can be to go back and recreate the past, even one that is well documented. I had to learn more about Mr. Johnson, about the ford and the ferry, and corroborate the newspaper accounts of the time with the actual documentation in the minutes of RHS. Possibly, some folks out there remember this time and have more information to add to my supposition. I would welcome that.

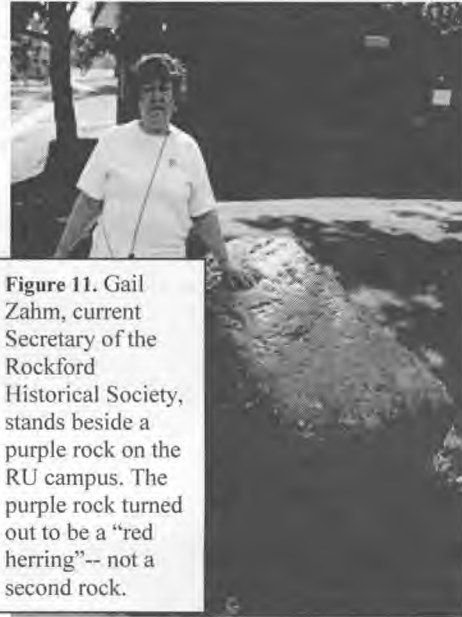


Figure 11. Gail Zahm, current Secretary of the Rockford Historical Society, stands beside a purple rock on the RU campus. The purple rock turned out to be a "red herring"-- not a second rock.

PUZZLES REMAIN

Some puzzles remain. For one, what did the plaque say? The original bronze plaque disappeared sometime after 1968. My hope is that at least one of the two plaques is still in existence. I have heard rumors that a plaque still exists and is in someone's basement, but I have not been able to verify that. The *RHS Archival Notebook #1* was both helpful and not regarding the text of the plaque. Preserved in the record were three different documents that were suggested as possible content for the plaque. The newspaper at the time had only excerpted what was written on the plaque. It was not until the picture of the rock from *Sinnissippi Saga* (Nelson, 1968) was digitized, enlarged to nearly readable and then perused with an old fashioned 10x magnifying glass and compared with the three different possible documents that we were able to piece together what the plaque said. Below is the reconstructed text as I was able to decipher it.

Rockford is so named for the "ford" site where the dam is built. The dam is built on a solid flat rock bottom. The water went up to the front axles of the wagons. Hogs and sheep were herded across the ford. The ford served as a bridge for the Indians, for the brave settlers of the area, and for the pioneers that were heading west with their covered wagons from 1830-1844.

Erected 1965

Figure 12. Reconstruction of the Rockford Ford Memorial Marker plaque. Recreated from extant evidence by Carol Fox. An independent reconstruction would be welcome to verify the wording.

WHAT SHOULD WE DO ABOUT THE ROCK NOW?

Here is one more puzzle. What should we do about the rock? Based on the evidence or lack of it, I think the rock belongs to RHS. The area around the rock is littered with broken glass and other debris. The landscape is feral; the railroad track leading to the rock from Main Street has weatherworn and broken cross ties and is also strewn with broken glass and rubble. The embankment is craggy and dangerous. The bridge is likely hazardous. There is no question that the rock is not being looked after, but what should we do about it?

According to the Winnebago County Supervisor of Assessments website, the tiny strip of land on which the rock sits is owned now by Commonwealth Edison. Could the rock be moved to below the embankment to the north of its present site? The city owns this site. Could RHS members arrange a "Clean-Up" project? Could we, at the very least, replace the plaques with plastic replicas so that the rock's purpose is known? Could something more elaborate be done--turn the railroad track into a garden site and walk? Or, should the rock be moved to, say, Midway Village where it would have care, but no longer have context? Perhaps some other plans are in progress into which the rock could be incorporated.

What should we do about the rock? If you will use the following useful phrase as you think about that question, I'm sure we can come up with a grand way to reconnect this rock and what it memorializes with the city. The RHS Board will gladly entertain your suggestions and try to think what to do and how to do it to give this venerable old rock a better environment. The useful phrase is: What if we . . .

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We welcome manuscripts and photos to area historical events and personalities, for publication consideration. We reserve the right to edit and to condense. For return, please include a self-addressed stamped envelope. Send to NUGGETS EDITOR, ROCKFORD HISTORICAL SOCIETY, 654 CASTLE WYND DR, LOVES PARK, IL 61111.
