

# Mineral Point HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Dedicated to Preserving the Unique History of Mineral Point

## 2015 Annual Meeting and Lyceum: “Early Bank Notes of Mineral Point”

by Nancy Pfothenauer

Robert McNeill was a hit at the January Lyceum, held in the former bank building on the corner of High and Chestnut streets. A collector of old currency, McNeill gave a most interesting presentation on money issued and used in Mineral Point from 1836 through 1935. His slide show was supplemented with a large variety of pieces from his collections, which included bank notes, tokens, and real photo postcards (RPPCs).

McNeill’s earliest pieces are from 1837 when Mineral Point was incorporated as a Borough in Wisconsin Territory and was authorized to issue \$35,000 in banknotes in \$1, \$2, and \$3 denominations. His collection continues through several eras of banks and banking and contains notes from various Mineral Point and area banks, most of which failed, as well as other forms of currency such as merchant scrip and tokens.

McNeill drew attention to the physical appearance of the notes, particularly the elaborate “vignettes”, or artwork, on the early currency which depicted romanticized versions of subjects such as Native Americans and Lady Liberty.

As McNeill said, delving into one area of history inevitably leads to many others and his presentation touched on several aspects of early banking in the area, including some of the scandals, most notably Phil Allen Jr.’s embezzlement of large sums from the bank that was located in the very building where the Lyceum was held.

The MPHS Annual Meeting was held just before McNeill’s talk. Nancy Pfothenauer, treasurer, reported that the Society’s income in 2014 was just over \$35,000, with about a third coming directly from members in the form of dues, additional gifts, donations for specific projects, and matching grants from the Alliant Foundation. Expenditures from the general account in 2014 were just over \$36,000, with the difference between income and expenses met by a balance in the account at the beginning of the year. Board members Carl Tunestam and Lucille May were re-elected to three year terms. ●



Top: At the January Lyceum collector Robert McNeill shared his knowledge of currency issued by Mineral Point Banks.

Bottom: McNeill’s collection of bank notes, real photo postcards, and tokens were displayed and discussed after his presentation.

# The Mineral Point Opera House's First Motion Picture Screening: DW Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation*

by Joel Gosse

When the Municipal Theatre (as the Mineral Point Opera House was then called) opened in 1915, and for the next 25 years, its productions were mostly live plays and musicals, with, on occasion, a smattering of 'polite vaudeville between acts'. However, a year after its dedication, the Opera House departed from its customary entertainment to screen its first motion picture: *The Birth of a Nation*.

This 'photoplay' and 'mammoth spectacle', was shown at the Municipal Theatre during a three-day period from February 3-5, 1916, with a matinee and an evening performance each day. Tickets for the matinee cost from 50 cents to one dollar and for the evening, from 25 cents to \$1.50. The film was distributed by the Elliott and Sherman Film Company of Minneapolis, Minnesota, who had exclusive rights of production in 'Wisconsin and the Western District.' An ad in the Tribune says 'we would play this production just the same as played in Milwaukee, with an organization of twenty-one musicians, entire stage effects, and everything else.'

The ad called the attraction 'the greatest thing that has been produced of all time, including all drama or any other form of play produced on the stage' and said the film cost \$500,000 to produce and ran for three hours with a five minute intermission.

The film was considered so important, special train service was arranged: 'For stations on the Mineral Point & Northern Railway the Railway will hold their afternoon passenger train at Mineral Point until after the matinee on Friday and Saturday, February 4th and 5th, leaving for all stations immediately after performance.'

"*The Birth of a Nation*" was, in many respects, an important film. While its actual cost was probably closer to \$120,000, this was 10-20 times the cost of an average film at the time. Theaters showing films were just starting to gain acceptance, moving the medium away from its perception as a novelty and the film theatre itself as a iniquitous venue. Distribution of the film to larger and more dignified venues such as an opera house helped this shift in perception.

Only a few years earlier, film theaters carried the moniker 'nickelodeon', a place where short films could be viewed for a nickel; the usual venue was a storefront. When "*The Birth of a Nation*" played the Municipal Theatre, the prices for admission were comparable to those of a play or other 'more refined' entertainment.

The film opened in Los Angeles on February 8, 1915. It was a great success, but met challenges in the year before it came to Mineral Point. Initially titled "*The Klansman*", its name was changed when it premiered in New York. The film's racist nature caused riots in Boston and Chicago, and Griffith removed sequences from the film at the insistence of the NAACP. As much as it was innovative, it was equally destructive for its influence in the resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan.

A week after the showing, an article in the Mineral Point Tribune, titled 'Stupendous Production,' noted that, apart from the first matinee on Thursday, the other five shows were heavily attended, that 'our beautiful and commodious municipal theatre was filled to overflowing,' and that 'Residents of

this city turned out quite thoroughly, some twice.' The train on Friday 'brought in from two to three hundred denizens from surrounding communities,' with double that number on Saturday.

The article praised the scope and production of the film, but mentioned what the author felt was the lack of representation in Union victories over the Confederacy. Apparently the author was not aware that the film was an adaptation of two novels that bemoaned the loss of the Confederacy and the impending evils of a post-slavery America.

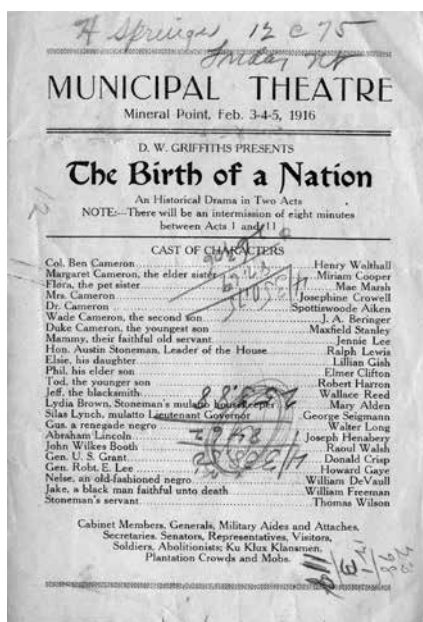
That critique touches on a problem inherent with this as well as many other historical films that continues to this day: the molding of historical events to fit a storybook perspective and marketability considerations. One of the major criticisms of

"*The Birth of a Nation*" was best quipped by Wisconsin-born Thorstein Veblen: 'Never before had I seen such concise misinformation.'

Still, the historical, aesthetic, and novel techniques of the film cannot be discounted, unlike its storyline. The film became a laboratory of study for many film makers, and, along with Griffith's subsequent film "*Intolerance*", became the touchstone for the evolution of film editing and montage perfected by the films of the Soviet Union and German Expressionism in the 1920's. ●

#### Sources:

- Mineral Point Tribune: January 6 through February 10, 1916.*
- Movie-Made America: A Cultural History of American Movies: Robert Sklar, Random House, 1975.*
- The American Film Industry, revised edition: Tino Balio, University of Wisconsin Press, 1985.*
- A History of Narrative Film: David Cook, Norton, 1981.*



# Mineral Point Municipal Building Celebrates Centennial

The Municipal Building, one hundred years old this month, replaced two buildings – Iowa County’s third courthouse, constructed in 1843, and the county’s office building, built in 1841.

In 1861, when the county Court and other officials moved to the new courthouse in Dodgeville following the infamous “County Seat War”, the City of Mineral Point took over the old buildings. The City Council rented the office building to a bank, the City Clerk moved into the former courthouse, and the name of the building was officially changed to the City Building.



*In 1882, the top floor of the old courthouse was converted to an opera house, with the upper portion of the portico enclosed for a stage.*



*The building west of the old courthouse served as county offices before the county seat moved to Dodgeville, then it was rented by the City to William Henry for use as a bank. The bell tower topped the fire station just west of the bank.*

The County Seat War was not quite over, however. Title to the “public square”, on which the Mineral Point courthouse stood, belonged to the city of Mineral Point; with the removal of the county officials, possession reverted to the city, which the county disputed.

To avoid litigation, Mineral Point was willing to pay to the county \$1,600 in four annual installments. The county wanted to compromise; they offered to divide the property in half, with the county to take the eastern part, on Vine Street, and Mineral Point to take the western part, with all the buildings. The city refused, whereupon the county sued the city for the entire property, but lost the suit.

Finally, in 1868, the county accepted a proposal from Mineral Point for \$1,500 with \$500 interest, payable in three annual payments, as settlement in full for the disputed title. By this time, the old building was in a sad state of disrepair. The county had apparently taken all the furnishings, including stoves, lamps and seating, with them. The Mineral Point Literary Association and the Lodge of Good Templars proposed to refurbish the upper floor in exchange for use of the premises at designated times. At other times, the main hall could be used by the public.

In 1882, the upper floor was converted to an opera house and the upper portion of the portico was enclosed for a stage. To rent the space for concerts, theatrical exhibitions and lectures, the charge was \$10 a night.

In 1913, Mineral Point moved ahead with plans to build a new municipal building and theater on the Public Square and the former courthouse and county office were demolished. ●



*Even when the Municipal Building was almost ready for occupancy, half of the building next door, the former county office, was still standing.*

# A Brief History of the Library in Mineral Point

by James Harris

In the early days, Mineral Point was on the edge of the western frontier. The goal of most inhabitants was not intellectual enlightenment, rather the search for fame and fortune. The mineral region attracted representatives from every clime and calling, of every stripe of character, where the unwary and those flushed with success could easily be "taken in and done for." By 1849 a literary society and lyceum had been established. It was chaired by John B. Terry and George Bliss and James Hutchison served as librarians. Success of this venture is indicated by a plea published in the *Mineral Point Tribune* for the return of "40 volumes missing from the library, some for more than a year." Yet by December, 1866 an article in the *Tribune* lamented: "Why is it we have no lyceum, no reading room, no public library in Mineral Point? For want of a suitable place for spending winter evenings, many young people seek the enjoyments of the billiard rooms or the drinking saloons. We are willing to subscribe 25 volumes of good reading matter for a library, and others we presume, would do even more..." "Others" apparently took heed, for the *Tribune* reported in July, 1878: "The reading room of this City is now in as flourishing a condition as it ever has been...All are most cordially invited to visit the room, and especially those who fear being led into temptation."

Genesis of our present public library was the Woman's Reading Club, established in December, 1893, due to the untiring efforts of Mrs. March Chase, Miss Mary R. Gundry and Miss Amy Vivian. The core of the library consisted of 500 volumes collected by previous local book clubs offered in various locations, most recently J.J. Hanscom's store (214 High Street). Hutchisons graciously offered use of 2 rooms above their bank (current location of Red Rooster Building) rent free for 5 years, with heat included, and a subscription of \$100. Others donated \$600. The Free Library Commission sent a librarian to assist with cataloging the books. The Club was open to all women interested in literary work, and a lecture program was offered as a source of income and talent. After 5 years the library had

outgrown its quarters, and was moved to the Gillman building (current location of Berget Jewelers). More furniture was donated as well as a small stove and a supply of wood. The municipal electric company provided electricity to the site. The City donated \$150; \$100 toward rent and \$50 for book purchase. Each year the Club added 150-200 volumes.

In 1904, Miss Margaret Anne Crawford, daughter of Irish immigrants, was engaged as the regular librarian for the Club at a salary of \$5/month. The reading room was open every evening, and the library opened Wednesday and Saturday. Margaret had attended school in Mineral Point and graduated with the 2nd public high school graduating class of 1880. Maggie taught school and served as an assistant postmistress prior to becoming the first city librarian. She was described as "intelligent, unassuming, genial, sympathetic and fortified by Christian faith."

The Woman's Reading Club first offered the library to the City in 1904. The offer was declined on the ground that it was in competent hands, and would be an undue expense to the City. A request was then made to Andrew Carnegie for assistance. Carnegie offered to construct a \$10,000 library, but only if the City would commit to raising \$1,000 a year for its maintenance. The City declined to undertake the financial burden. In January, 1907, a committee of prominent citizens, chaired by Mayor Osborne formed to initiate "a project to secure a City Hall and Public Library facility." Fundraising benefits for a new structure were held, including a gala hosted at the Masonic Temple in December, 1908, featuring the Dubuque Harp Orchestra. In 1911, the City accepted the library equipment and



Photo courtesy of the Mineral Point Library Archives.

The Woman's Reading Club, open to all women interested in literary work, started the first version of the library with a collection of 500 volumes available to the public.



By 1900, the Reading Club's library was located in the Gilman building. Note the "Public Library" sign stenciled on the windows.

approximately 6000 books, but asked the Woman's Reading Club to continue management, with City assistance.

Construction of the new municipal building commenced August 15, 1913. The cost of moving the library to its new location together with purchase of equipment was \$1,500. As the new municipal building neared completion, the October 22, 1914 edition of the Iowa County Democrat described the library. "The library room is on the first floor of the East side of the building. It is well lighted and the windows to the East are so constructed as to allow the maximum amount of shelving. The work of painting the interior and the laying of the circulating pipes is almost completed. The contract for the shelving has been let and the work of putting it in will soon be commenced."

On Monday, February 15, 1915, the Municipal quarters, public library and opera house were dedicated, at services which took place in "that most beautiful audience room to be known as the 'municipal theatre.'" Rev. R.A. Barnes declared "a library where good books, books of reference, books that elevated morality and character, were next only to bread and butter in calculating the needs of a community." Prof. E.C. Gotham portrayed the need and aid of a free public library, but cautioned that young minds might be warped and weakened if time were spent with books that "did not fit, in the building of intellectual forces." Rev. L. P. O'Reilly expressed his hope that the facility "ever be the center of sociability." Mr. Dudgeon, Secretary of the State Library Commission summarized the opinion of all in attendance that "there was no superior combination under one roof in this state."



*Photo courtesy of the Mineral Point Library Archives.*

*The Reading Room was sparsely furnished but it did have a desk, a pot bellied stove, and a variety of volumes on the shelves.*

Maggie Crawford continued as librarian until ill health led to her retirement in 1930. The library board attributed much of the success of the library to her "kindly interest in patrons of the library." Since then the library has been managed by just two librarians: Blanche Treweek, whose tenure ran from 1930 to 1977, and Barbara Polizzi who began in August, 1977. As we begin the next 100 year use of the municipal building, the library board has established its mission to provide "a gateway to the world, in a community space, where everyone is welcome." ●

## Culture in Our Town

*by James Harris*

February marks the centennial anniversary of the Mineral Point Opera House, a place which has provided much pleasure and entertainment. But in light of an early comment on life in this mining town, "riotous carousing, gambling and other bacchanalian revels marked the nights and served to distinguish them from day," we might well ask "was there any culture or love of beauty in our town" prior to 1915?

The Mineral Point Library Archives reveals a fascinating answer to the question through newspaper accounts and notes and materials collected by William P. Gundry and compiled by local historian Robert Neal.

One of the early venues for artistic expression was Lenahan's Hall, on the upper floor of the building at 140, 142 and 146 High Street. From 1869 to 1872 productions there included: The Peak Family Bell Ringers, Lewellyn's Traveling Troupe, a Panorama of the Visions of St. John, Hamlin's Minstrels, actress Melissa Breslau's portrayal of Medea, and Uncle Tom's Cabin.

The second floor of the "Old Courthouse" was used as an opera house for many years. From the 1870s to the early twentieth century the opera house featured numerous and varied productions, among them: Grand

Amateur Concerts of Local Talent, melodramas by traveling professional troupes, such as Noble's Dramatic Company presentation of Passion's Slave, "a story of rival lovers, murder and a fight for life in the dark waters of the ocean," comic lectures by Professor Villars, Colonel Sanford and others, The McGibeny Family, "largest musical family known to the world," the Hyers Sisters Colored Opera Company, and the Boston Ladies Symphony Orchestra.

Beginning in 1892 the Primitive Methodist Meeting House hosted musical events including the Rawson Family Musical Company, the Redpath Grand Concert Company, and Ye Olde Folkes Concerte featuring such local singers as "Pecatonica Pearl Callow" and "Wakemearly Cork."

The Methodist Episcopal Church offered pipe organ and violin entertainment, and to dispel that early observation of over-indulgent behavior in this place, the Good Templars Hall featured a program of Women's Christian Temperance Union instruction.

Yes, we can echo Thornton Wilder and say that over the years past "we have had a lot of pleasure of a kind here in our town." ●

# Ostergrants Resign from MPHS Board

Sadly, both Matt and Denise Ostergrants have resigned from the MPHS Board of Directors, due to health reasons. They leave a large gap to fill. In addition to serving as the President of the Board for the last two years, Matt has put in countless hours at Orchard Lawn, making sure the furnace is still running on the coldest nights, the never-ending painting tasks are done as scheduled, the doors are open when service-men need to call, the display rooms are emptied, painted, and put back together again, and paying attention to umpteen other details few of us even hear about. Denise has faithfully replied to each and every member who sends in their dues and additional gifts, and has made sure events at Orchard Lawn run smoothly, including the Founders' Day parties and Jammin' on the Porch, in addition to serving on the Board. Their fellow Board members, as well as all of the members of the MPHS, can't thank them enough for their cheerful willingness to take on any task and for their dedication to the Society. We wish them all the best. ●



**Don't forget to renew your Historical Society membership for 2015!**

The membership form is available on page 8.



Photo courtesy Jude Clayton

## Tree Care at Orchard Lawn

Care and maintenance of the trees at Orchard Lawn is an ongoing and necessary task. Rod Boley and crew of Boley's Tree and Landscape Care, Middleton, attended to several dozen trees this summer. Some varieties, such as oaks, can be safely trimmed only when dormant so the crew returned earlier this winter to continue their work when the ground and trees were frozen. Boley's have been maintaining the trees on our historic grounds since 2002 and take great care to give each the attention it needs. ●



## A Gift to the City

Mineral Point City Administrator/Clerk Treasurer Debi Heisner (right) and Deputy Clerk Treasurer Jody Shemak (left) show two of the historic photographs recently donated to the City by the MPHS. Eleven framed prints of images from the Mineral Point Historical Society and the Mineral Point Library Archives photograph collections were given to the City to hang in the Community Room to promote the awareness of the historic resources available to area residents. The MPHS collection is indexed and searchable on a computer in the Archives and prints from both collections are available to purchase. ●

# Why Does It Matter?

by Nancy Pfotenhauer

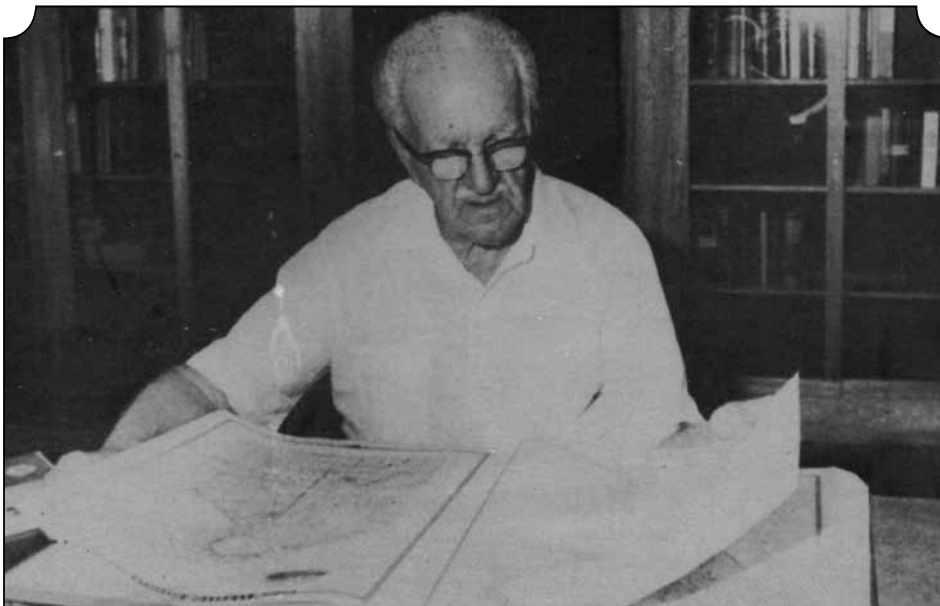
This is a question I often ask myself, and, fair warning, I still haven't found the answer. But it came up again the other night when I watched a new-to-me TV program, "Genealogy Roadshow." Now, I don't even know where to send you to see this program; someone in my household came across it and told our DVR to record it, so I'm watching recorded versions of it. And it isn't even that great, as far as history programs go - it's a bit over-produced and they conveniently avoid showing the numbing hours of research that must have gone into finding the fact or two they triumphantly present to the eager participants.

It's the participants who are the key. They aren't the celebrities that "Who Do You Think You Are" sends all over the world to ferret out their personal histories (like those people need a free trip to Ireland!) or the ones that Henry Louis Gates focuses on in "Finding Your Roots", they're just ordinary people trying to find out a little more about their own family's history.

The premise of the show is that the experts set up in some public institution, like a library, in a large city, and the public streams in with questions about their grandparents, or their great-grandparents, or whatever. We, the TV audience, sit in on the interview, watch the expert clatter away on their keyboard and, Ta Da!, some amazing fact appears on the very large wide screen monitor, while the Ordinary Person reacts.

And, to me, this is the important part of the show. It's not what Ordinary Person says, which is usually "Oh Wow!" or "I had no idea!", it's the look on their faces when they see, for the first time, some little piece of their own history that they didn't know before.

And that's the part that matters. Why is this important to that ordinary person, or us, as other ordinary persons? That connection to their past delights them, as our connection to our past delights us. I don't know why this is important, I just know that it is. And I know that the MPHS is doing its bit to keep the past available so that at some point, it is there to delight someone. Who knows? That someone might even be you. ●



**Mr. History:** Robert M. Neal (1906-1983) was dedicated to preserving the history of Mineral Point, his home town. He and his partner, Edgar Hellum, purchased and rejuvenated many different properties in the city, most notably, those on Shake Rag now part of the Pendarvis State Historic Site. Neal was one of the founders of the Mineral Point Historical Society. His collection of historic papers and memorabilia, donated to the Mineral Point Public Library, form the nucleus of the collection in the Mineral Point Library Archive.

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Nancy Pfotenhauer

NEWSLETTER DESIGN: Kristin Mitchell Design

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## Mineral Point Historical Society *Membership Form*

January 1, 2015 to December 31, 2015

All members receive the newsletter  
and free tours of Orchard Lawn.

### Please check one:

- Individual (\$15.00)  
 Family (\$25.00)  
 Business (\$50.00)

Additional Contribution:

\$ \_\_\_\_\_

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Make checks payable to the  
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Mineral Point Historical Society  
P.O. Box 188 • Mineral Point, WI 53565

**Please remember to mail your  
membership dues.**

# *Mineral Point* **HISTORICAL SOCIETY**

Dedicated to Preserving the Unique History of Mineral Point

P.O. Box 188 • 234 Madison Street  
Mineral Point, WI 53565  
608.558.1937

## Mark Your Calendars

### **Mineral Point Municipal Building Centennial Celebration**

137 High Street, Mineral Point  
February 15, 2015 • 1:00 p.m. – 4:00 p.m.

## February and March Lyceums Cancelled

Due to a variety of circumstances, the MPHS Board decided to forgo the February and March Lyceums this year. The City's celebration of the centennial of the municipal building falls on Sunday, February 15th and will do well as a substitute for the February Lyceum. We urge you all to attend. We will simply forgo the March Lyceum but plan to be back with a full slate of interesting topics in 2016.

Change Service Requested

[www.mineralpointhistory.org](http://www.mineralpointhistory.org)



The Municipal Building, which houses City Hall, the Public Library and Archives, and the Opera House celebrates its one hundredth birthday this year.