



Newsletter

MISSION STATEMENT

The Grafton Historical Society is a non-profit 501(c)3 organization founded and operated by volunteers. We are dedicated to the discovery, preservation and sharing of Grafton area history.

GHS OFFICERS

Tom Krueger
President

Dave Antoine
Vice President

Debbie Krueger
Secretary

John Krueger
Treasurer

Nick Schanen
Director

Jim Wegner
Director

John Gassert

Fall, 2024

Message from the President

My newsletter message each quarter usually begins with a brief weather observation to mark the passage of time and changes in the season, followed by updates and changes at the Grafton Historical Society. **With this issue, I am pleased and excited to also announce some major news.**

We are currently close to an agreement to secure a “home” for the Grafton Historical Society. The historic Timothy Wooden Building, adjacent to the Grafton Library on Cedar Street, has recently become available for new tenants. This is thanks to an agreement between the Village of Grafton and the new building manager creating the Wooden Legacy Foundation, Inc. (WLF). The Historical Society board has already identified preferred rooms in the building, with space enough for its needs. The next step is to agree to a sub-tenant lease with the WLF – hopefully within the next few months. If all goes according to plan, the Grafton Historical Society will be “open for business” in early 2025 with space for archives storage, office and resource areas, and exhibit

Director

*Darrel Blank
Director*

*Phyllis Wiggins
Director*

*Emily Engstrom
Director*

display. We are excited about this major step forward for the Society. Our hope is that it will provide greater visibility and a stronger presence in the community for Grafton history. With this new home and permanent space we also anticipate much more to do and a need for volunteer help. Stay tuned for more information, or feel free to contact any board member with your interest.

A Grafton historical society museum has been a goal first voiced in 1998 by Grafton's early historian - Mr. Ralph Zaun. It has been a long time coming but the future looks bright for this dream to become a reality.

Working to "Discover, Preserve and Share" Grafton history.

Tom Krueger
GHS President



...About Grafton's History

1. The "real" first citizen of Grafton?

The town of Grafton is one of the oldest in the county. By 1835 the land was surveyed and ready for public sale. John Drake was



6. Calling all horses.

The Grafton Volunteer Fire Department was founded on July 1, 1896. Brewer William

found living in a little log and bark shanty as early as 1839. Timothy Wooden, however, who came later, is often given credit as the first settler. In 1838 Wooden purchased 147 acres of land at \$1.25 per acre, which comprised the eventual business district of Grafton. In 1846 Wooden became Grafton's first Justice of the Peace.

2. Three names for one village.

The origin of Grafton's name is unknown. From 1840-46 the unincorporated village was known as Hamburg, probably due to the influence of Jacob Eichler, an early settler from Hamburg, Germany. The name was changed to Grafton in 1846. It is speculated that Benjamin Moore, an early settler and hotel keeper, may have chosen this name, that of a main business street in Dublin, Ireland. In 1857 the name was changed again, this time to Manchester. Five years later that name reverted permanently to Grafton.

3. School bells ring early.

Grafton was an early leader in education. By 1845 only three townships in the county had schools: Germantown, Mequon and Grafton.

4. Newspaper for a year.

The first Grafton newspaper, the Washington County Eagle, made its appearance on August 14, 1847, and bowed

Weber was elected chief. It appears that the department did not own horses, since the village records show that it agreed to pay \$4 to the first team that hooked onto the fire wagon, money to be paid upon return of the equipment.

7. Mary Ellen Cook stranded in Grafton.

In September, 1901, a three masted schooner named Mary Ellen Cook, was stranded on the beach near the south boundary of the town of Grafton. The captain and owner, Hermann Olson, walked to Grafton to telephone for a tug to pull her off. The rescue operation was not successful.

8. A new dining sensation.

In 1901 the Grafton column of the Cedarburg Weekly News reported the rumor that Grafton would have a canning factory for Belgian hares. This delicacy, "unsurpassed for table use, was said to bring 25-30 cents per pound. Unfortunately, the deal fell through.

9. Equine motor is the old standby.

Mixed emotions greeted the advent of the automobile. Newspaper accounts from 1907 report, "John Gebe of Germantown came to town in an auto whose engine then gave out. He had to call for a horse and buggy to take him home. The "equine motor" is still our old standby.

out in 1848, a victim of the November election.

5. A 1881 glimpse of Grafton.

In that year the village was comprised of the woolen mill, grist mill, a chair and furniture factory, one brewery and one cheese factory, 25 business houses, two wagon and blacksmith shops, and three churches - one Catholic, one Lutheran and one Presbyterian.

10. Poultry problems?

In April, 1907, the citizens of Grafton asked for a village ordinance to prevent chickens and ducks from parading on public and private sidewalks, lawns, gardens and porches.

Source: A Tour of Historic Grafton, published by the Grafton Junior Woman's Club, Inc., 1982.



Skip James

Nehemiah Curtis "Skip" James was an American Delta blues singer, guitarist, pianist and songwriter. A notable music review has stated, "*Coupling an oddball guitar tuning set against eerie, falsetto vocals, James' early recordings could make your hair stand up on the back of your neck.*"

Early Years

James was born in 1902 near Betonia, Mississippi. His mother was a cook and babysitter on a nearby

Rediscovered

Just as his career was beginning, the Great Depression hit and sales of his records dropped off. For the next 33 years, the Blues artist made no recordings and only performed occasionally. Then in 1964, Blues enthusiasts found James in a hospital in Mississippi and he was essentially rediscovered. In July of that year, James and other Blues artists appeared at the Newport Folk Festival and his career began again. He revisited his music from earlier days, concentrating on traditional music and spirituals along with some new Blues music that he composed. It was

plantation and his father was a bootlegger who left the family around 1907. As a child, he was drawn to music. His mother gave him a \$2.50 guitar and then wrote his first song in his early 20's. Those early years, however, were difficult for James. For most of the 1920's, he was a bootlegger and a gambler. His lifestyle was reportedly so "unbridled", that when he returned to Mississippi from Texas in 1929, there were local reports that he had died violently there.

Records in Grafton

James work in low-paying jobs but also performed as a street singer. His big break came in 1931 when he auditioned for a talent scout for Paramount Records and was given a contract. In that year he traveled to Grafton and made several recordings, although very few original copies of those records have survived.

a short lived career, however, as James died of cancer on October 3, 1969 in Philadelphia at the age of 67.

One Windfall

James' biographers state that more of his recordings are actually available since his death than when he was alive, many being reissued on compact discs. They add that James had one windfall in his life, when the British rock group Cream recorded his "I'm So Glad" and provided him with \$10,000 in royalties.

James was added to Grafton's Paramount Plaza Walk of Fame in 2007.



We're pleased to announce many recent donations to our archives.

To help with these donations, we are in the process of initiating software specifically for historical archiving. This means efficient record keeping and the ability to share our archives digitally on our website. If you have items that are potentially of historical interest to the Grafton area, please contact us. We're anxious to see our collection grow, especially as we anticipate a new home for the Grafton Historical Society.



Thanks to you...

...we're within \$500 of our fundraising goal!

Because of your generosity, work has begun on the restoration of the historic Wisconsin Chair Factory oil painting.

The historic painting is by M.P. Gossens, dated 1915, and was discovered in the Wisconsin Chair Company building before the structure was demolished. This artwork is very important because the chair factory was central to putting Grafton on the map in the Blues music industry. It was gifted to the GHS by the Grafton Chamber of Commerce.

The chair factory was built in 1848. It operated as a furniture manufacturer until 1873.

On December 14, 1916, the Wisconsin Chair Company founded the New York Recording Laboratories and began restructuring the factory to manufacture 78-rpm records for use on phonographs the company also produced. The first record made in Grafton was created from a New York City studio master on June 19, 1917. The New York Recording Labs continued operations until 1932.

The Great Depression forced the company to discontinue leasing recording studios in New York and Chicago. Instead, it operated its own Grafton studio from 1929 to 1932. Hundreds of Wisconsin and out-of-state musicians recorded here. Among them were blues legends such as Charlie Patton, Skip James, Blind Blake, Son House, Willie Brown and Big Bill Broonzy.

The last record was made in July 1932 by the Mississippi Sheiks. The building was demolished in 1938.

The restoration has now begun on the painting and the GHS is looking forward to the painting being available for the public to view. Thanks for your generous support so far. If you'd like to help us get to our final goal of \$2,000 please send your check, made out to the Grafton Historical Society to P.O. Box 481, Grafton, WI, 53024. All donations are fully deductible.

Thank you!



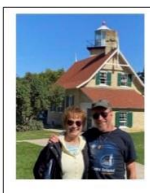
This Christmas, the Grafton Historical Society will once again participate in the Grafton Christmas Parade. Come and enjoy the parade and remember to say "Hi."



**THE GRAFTON HISTORICAL SOCIETY
PRESENTS:**

Wisconsin Lighthouses

Lighthouses have traditionally been viewed as symbols of **hope and security**. As beacons of light, they provide guidance for safe passage to sailors and protect not only their lives but the land nearby. Hear the story of Wisconsin's historic beacons with breathtaking photography of lighthouses from Milwaukee North Point to Cana Island Lighthouse.



First bitten by the "Lighthouse Bug" in Door County, Ken and Barb Wardius began accumulating Wisconsin lighthouse photographs and explored the history of these marvelous maritime beacons. They have since published four books on Wisconsin Lighthouses.

All donations from our presentation will help fund the restoration of the historic Grafton Chair Factory painting.



**Thursday,
January 16th**

**6:00 p.m.
Rose Harms
Legion Post
1540 13th Avenue
Grafton**

**Free and open to the
public.**

**Refreshments and
Cash Bar**

**GRAFTON HISTORICAL
SOCIETY**

P.O. Box 481
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info@graftonareahistory.org





**The Peshtigo Fire Presentation
Draws Large Crowd**

More than 100 people attended the GHS Peshtigo Fire presentation in October. Dave Siegel, retired captain of the Green Bay Metro Fire Department and expert on the 1871 fire, combined scientific facts about the fire with survivor stories of heroics and tragedies from that fateful day. Audience members left with a new understanding of the most devastating fire in American history.



We've joined!

The Grafton Historical Society is now an official
member of the

American Association for State and Local History.

AASLH provides resources for history lovers, professionals, volunteers, and enthusiasts. It provides crucial resources, guidance, professional development, advocacy, new publications, field-wide research, and a sense of connectedness to more than 5,500 institutional and individual members, as well as leadership for

history and history organizations nationally. It is the only comprehensive national organization dedicated to state and local history.



Coming in February...

The GHS will offer a presentation on Abraham Lincoln by James Cornelius, society member and Lincoln expert. Cornelius is the former curator of the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum in Springfield, Illinois.

DO YOU KNOW?

With this issue we'd like to continue our "Mystery Item" feature. If you have an idea what this item might be contact us

at: info@graftonareahistory.org.

If you have an item that you need help identifying and would like to submit it for a future newsletter edition, we'd be happy to include it.



DID YOU KNOW?

If you said that this **Mystery Item** from the last issue of our Newsletter was ...

An Early Toaster

Early toasters had a stand-up heating element with a fold-down door on each side. The user would put the bread in, raise the door, and time it for one minute. Then they would drop the door, turn the bread over, and toast the other side.

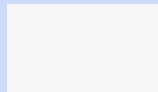




We're happy to report that the GHS membership is growing! This year we have already registered many new individual, family and lifetime memberships.

If you are not already a member, we invite you to join us to Discover, Preserve, and Share Grafton history.

<http://www.graftonareahistory.org>



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