




Honoring Volunteers: The Lifeblood of Our Organization

This issue of *History Matters* is dedicated to all our volunteers, past and present. The Historical Society of Oak Park and River Forest would not exist without this strong corps of people who give their time and talent to the myriad tasks required to keep our organization vital and growing. Whether donating professional expertise or planning a special event; whether spearheading a major project or doing the endless sorting, organizing and filing required to maintain our archives; whether raising funds or guiding tours: their service evinces a love of history, a commitment to community, and a desire to serve that deserves our respect and admiration.

Each issue of *History Matters* will highlight some of the efforts of our volunteers. In this issue, Robin Wardle and Marilyn Wardle report on a three-year project they just completed and honor an earlier volunteer in the process. Lee Conte shares her passion for a specific part of our collection and shows us the item that first captivated her. And we begin by introducing the design team that is donating their professional services to help make our new museum and history center a reality. 

Design Team Brings Expertise to Planning New Home Architect & Engineers Make Sure Building Meets 21st Century Needs



Mark Nussbaum, Lou Garapolo, and Roger Reckers in front of the firehouse

As the walls and ceilings came down and the floors were pulled up, the 1898 bones of the old brick building at Lake and Lombard were fully revealed for the first time in 100 years. While most visitors to the community Open House events this spring

and summer may marvel at the two-inch-thick Georgia pine plank floors and the decorative grooved pine bead board on the walls and ceilings, three Oak Park men know that it is crucial to look past the 19th century roots of the building into the 21st century if the building is truly going to serve the villages for decades to come. The average person looks at aesthetics, but the project architect and engineers need to focus on load-bearing ratios, fire exit distances, diameter of fire sprinkler pipes, and today's energy code.

At the head of the all-volunteer design team is architect Lou Garapolo of Garapolo and Associates in Downtown Oak Park. When the idea of renovating the designated Oak Park Landmark

at 129 Lake Street was first publicly aired more than six years ago, Garapolo sent a letter to the Historical Society, offering an open-ended commitment of architectural design services, all the way from initial conception through final drawings. That pro bono donation now surpasses \$100,000 in value as the blueprints turn into reality each day on the job site.



The interior of the firehouse after the ceiling and walls have been stripped.

(Continued on page 2)

Design Team...

(Continued from page 1)

"That letter from Lou was one of the most exciting things about this project for me," said Executive Director Frank Lipo. "I knew Lou from when he previously did some research at the Historical Society and from his reputation for community involvement. He is such a professional and a straight shooter who has shown great patience and enthusiasm. His dedication to our project has been phenomenal as we worked through some rough concepts to get to where we are today. And to have his fee of 10% of total project costs be given as a donation has been crucial to our tight budget, maximizing every donor dollar."

But Lou's help didn't stop at his own drawing board. He worked closely with Oak Park architect Frank Heitzman on preliminary concepts arising from the initial brainstorming, which led into the first conceptual plans. Then he arranged for the pro bono donation of a professional cost estimate from Bear Construction Co. of Rolling Meadows, used to develop the preliminary construction budget. When the fund raising reached a critical mass, Lou sought out colleagues Roger Reckers and Mark Nussbaum, fellow Oak Park residents, to see if they were willing to share their professional expertise with the Historical Society.

Professional Engineer Mark E. Nussbaum, who runs the Oak Park firm Architectural Consulting Engineers, and Structural

Engineer Roger Reckers, Principal at Chicago firm TGRWA, LLC, signed onto the design team and have together donated professional services approaching \$40,000 for the project. Nussbaum designed the plumbing, electrical and lighting, and HVAC systems, which meant numerous meetings, measurements, and calculations and the oversight of those aspects of the project as contractors have gotten to work.

It was Nussbaum who suggested that the project use a geothermal HVAC system, since the Historical Society wanted more rigorous and cost-effective humidity control. Pleasant Home, the Historical Society's location since 1970, has always lacked central air conditioning and humidity controls.




New 21st century ducts for geothermal HVAC in the 19th century building.

(Photo by Connie Henderson-Damon)

Nussbaum has developed quite a reputation in the museum field for his embrace of green technology. He has designed geothermal systems now in use or under construction at the Evanston Historical Society's

Dawes Mansion, Frank Lloyd Wright's Fabyan Villa Museum, the Glessner House Museum in Chicago, and Oak Park's own Unity Temple.

"The geothermal HVAC is a costly part of the project, but with Mark's guidance and expertise, we learned that we will recoup the higher upfront costs with better performance and energy savings for years to come, which is important because our lease with the Village of Oak Park requires us to pay utility costs," said Lipo. "There is also satisfaction in tapping into the earth's own energy and we feel that our facility will be greener and a healthy blend of history and cutting edge technology. Mark's work and assistance helps us be a part of the museum sector's efforts to tap into sustainable technology."

Reckers' expertise was important because we had no original blueprints for the 115-year-old building. It was crucial to have a structural engineer examine hidden building elements as they were uncovered, like second floor support columns revealed for the first time in 60 years and deteriorated structural supports beneath a basement staircase. "Roger has been involved to a lesser degree than Lou and Mark because of the more narrow scope, but his counsel has been important to ensure that what we do is structurally sound," said Lipo. "With expertise that covers the gamut from historic buildings like the Rookery Building and Robie House to modern Loop skyscrapers, we are lucky to have him on our team." 

The Historical Society Wishes to Thank These Generous Donors for Their Contributions to a New Home for History

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Note: Please let us know if we inadvertently left you off this list or misspelled a name. We will print donor lists periodically in future issues.

Of "Siler Sheets" and Street Files

by Robin Wardle and Marilyn Wardle

Among the tools most frequently used by people researching homes, businesses, and properties in Oak Park and River Forest are our Street Files, an extensive collection of news articles, photographs, documents, and other references to properties in our two communities, all filed by street address. These items were lovingly collected and filed by many volunteers over many years.

Most notable among these volunteers was Jim Siler, a retired Oak Park and River Forest High School French teacher. Before the proliferation of PCs and document digitization, Jim Siler patiently read through over 100 years of local newspapers and real estate listings, recording every property reference he found (building permits, property sales, transfers, general information, etc.) on an 8 1/2" X 5 1/2" sheet of paper. Jim transcribed many thousands of these records-- truly a labor of love!

BUILDING PERMITS ISSUED
OAK PARK/RIVER FOREST

ADDRESS: 413 Linden
OWNER: Huston-Balson
CONTRACTOR: McKeenan+Duff
PRICE: \$20,000
OTHER INFORMATION: 2-story brick + frame residence

CITATION: Oak-Leavey, July 20, 1916, p. 27, Vol 31, # 27

A typical "Siler Sheet", one of over 20,000!

Shortly after we moved to Oak Park from out of state in 2012 and started volunteering at the Historical Society, we were introduced to the Street Files. At



Robin Wardle

that time, they were crammed into over-stuffed file folders and jammed into 9 file drawers. They were heavily used, but awkward to access. A single folder could cover several blocks and contain well over a 200 pieces of paper. After accidentally dropping one of the files, resulting in a lengthy resorting of news clippings and "Siler Sheets", we started talking with Frank Lipo about how to reduce the volume of material and increase the accessibility. We decided to do two things: 1) remove the Siler Sheets from the files, transferring the information to a searchable computer database, and 2) break down the remaining material into new color-coded folders, each of which, in most cases, would cover just a single block of the street.

Little did we know what we were getting into! Three years later, the project is finally done,

thanks to lots of help from many other Society volunteers and a few students to whom Frank could assign some data entry.



Marilyn Wardle
(Photos by Connie Henderson-Damon)

The result is a Street File that is much better looking and far easier to use as well as a searchable database that is available on the computers at the Historical Society. The database is called, fittingly, the Siler Index in memory of Jim Siler's dedication to Oak Park and River Forest history and his meticulous hard work.

Feedback on the new street files and database has been quite positive, which is very gratifying. But there was another, somewhat unexpected outcome as well. Many items in the files had uncertain street addresses. We would collect several of these and then go out for a bicycle ride to see if we could pin down the exact addresses. This "research" filled many pleasant weekends riding through the streets of Oak Park and River Forest, and helped us immensely in getting to know our new community!

Treasure in the Attic

by Lee Conte

Hidden away on the third floor of Pleasant Home are rooms that aren't on the tour and that few people have seen. When I was being trained as a docent, I got a cursory tour of the third floor maids' quarters and billiard room that today serve as storage rooms for the Historical Society's massive collection of artifacts. Walking into the billiard room, I was confronted by rack upon rack of clothes, all covered with protective sheets.

Then, one day, another volunteer showed me a dress we had, made from fine taffeta silk and dating back to the later 1800s. I was completely enamored. I was holding something worn over a hundred years ago, a memory of someone's life! On closer examination, I could see this garment had been skillfully hand sewn. The more I studied it-- the metal boning carefully sewn into the bodice to give it its shape, the machine-like evenness of the stitches-- the more I grew to appreciate the hours of work this garment must have taken to make.

Out of curiosity, I asked to what extent the clothes had been documented. I was told there was an incomplete inventory and only a small number had been photographed and matched with the collection database. I decided to take on the task of photographing and documenting each and every piece.

I was a bit naive in my ambition, thinking I could complete the task in a few months, but I was determined. Armed with a digital camera, some reference books, and my iPhone, I donned my archival gloves and eagerly uncovered the first rack. I soon realized that each dress was unique with a distinctive style of embroidery or lace or construction.




Wedding gown worn by Maggie Kerr at her marriage to Peter Boller, October 7, 1885. (Photo by Lee Conte)

I timidly removed the first outfit from the rack. It was a three-piece ensemble, embroidered with ivory flowers along the edges of the blouse, the bottom of the long skirt, and the matching petticoat. I had no idea what era it was from, but I carefully fit it on the smallest mannequin I could find, as the waist was impossibly tiny. I photographed it and took detailed shots of the lace and embroidery.

By consulting our donation records and online resources, we found that Maggie Kerr wore this dress on October 7, 1885, the day of her marriage to Peter Boller! Midge Ludwigs, their daughter, donated it to the Historical Society in 1972.



Detail of lace and embroidery on the bodice of the Kerr-Boller wedding gown (Photo by Lee Conte)

I have spent many a quiet afternoon meticulously examining, photographing, and documenting each piece that I encounter. Rather than tiring of it or becoming overwhelmed, I am still as passionate as I was that first day. Having only a few hours a week to volunteer has kept me at a snail's pace, but I know every piece of clothing I have touched so far, from a plain Victorian mourning dress to an up-scale graduation gown from the depression to a 1960s psychedelic paper dress. To me, each outfit is a time capsule, the whisper of a moment caught in the rustle of silk, ruffles, and lace. 

Civil War Program Series Concludes

“Civil War 150”, a series of lectures, performances, and film screenings commemorating the 150th anniversary of the end of the Civil War, concluded on April 20th with a captivating living history performance by actress and historian Leslie Goddard as Clara Barton.



Leslie Goddard as Clara Barton (Photo © Leslie Goddard)

This series was co-sponsored by the Oak Park Public Library and organized by Debby Preiser of the Library and Peggy Tuck Sinko of the Historical Society. It was made possible by a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities in partnership with the Gilder Lehman Institute for American History and the Library of America. 🍁

Open Houses Offer Glimpse into the Past and the Future

The Historical Society hosted a series of open houses at our future home in the former firehouse at Lake and Lombard

during April, May and June. Visitors saw firsthand the work that has been done so far and many of the amazing details of the original interior that have been uncovered. They also heard about our plans for completing the renovation project and about our vision for the new Museum and History Center.



Historical Society board member Kelli Kline points out an historic detail to a group of visitors. (Photo by Connie Henderson-Damon)

Watch for future open houses to be scheduled as the on-going construction work allows. 🍁

Decades of Design House Walk

DECADES OF DESIGN
IN RIVER FOREST
TOUR THE INTERIOR OF 5 SPECTACULAR HOMES
IN CENTRAL RIVER FOREST

A Historic House Walk
Guided By
THE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF
OAK PARK & RIVER FOREST

c.1885
1913
1901
1925
2005

Sunday, May 3rd, 2015
1-5 p.m.

This year's house walk in River Forest featured a trip through time with 5 houses from differ-

ent eras in the village's history. Starting with the Blocki House, built soon after the village was incorporated in 1880, to houses from 1913, 1925, 1951, and 2005, the tour reflected the changes in how villagers lived as their home evolved.

We would like to especially thank the homeowners who opened their doors to benefit the Historical Society. 🍁

Meet Emily Sterrett



(Photo by Lee Conte)

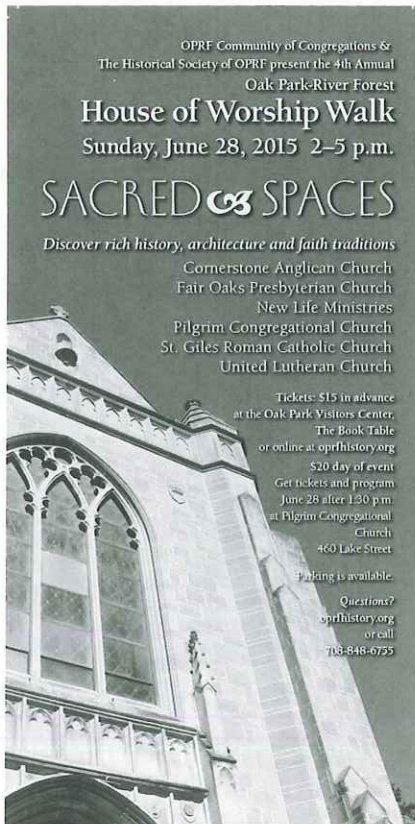
Emily Sterrett is the new Administrative Assistant for the Historical Society. Emily is a lifelong resident of Oak Park and a graduate of OPRF High School. She received her B.A. in history from the University of Illinois at Chicago in May 2015. Emily began working with the Historical Society as a volunteer tour guide in 2013.

“I come from a family that is very interested in history,” she said. “One branch of my family is well documented with a printed genealogy that inspired my interest in genealogy and local history. I am very excited about my opportunity to work for the Historical Society.” 🍁

UPCOMING EVENTS

Sunday, June 28th, 2 to 5 p.m.
4th Annual "Sacred Spaces" Tour
Features Six Oak Park Churches

Discover the rich history, architecture and faith traditions of six Oak Park houses of worship on Sunday, June 28, from 2 to 5 p.m. The Fourth Annual Sacred Spaces House of Worship Walk is co-sponsored by the Oak Park River Forest Community of Congregations and the Historical Society. The




houses of worship included are Cornerstone Anglican Church, Fair Oaks Presbyterian Church, New Life Ministries, Pilgrim

Congregational Church, St. Giles Catholic Church and United Lutheran Church.


“Almost everyone who travels in Europe visits the wonderful churches,” notes Frank Lipo, executive director of the Historical Society. “But not many of us visit architecturally significant houses of worship right in our own back yard.”

Joe McDonald, of Ascension Catholic Church and the Planning Committee for the OPRF Community of Congregations adds, “Few of us in Oak Park and River Forest venture outside of our own congregation to explore the history and faith of other houses of worship.”

Tickets are \$15 in advance, available at the Oak Park Visitors Center, 1010 Lake Street, at The Book Table, 1045 Lake St., or online at www.oprfhistory.org. On the day of the event, tickets and programs will be available at Pilgrim Congregational Church, 460 Lake Street, for \$20 after 1:30 p.m. 

Sunday August 2nd, 1 to 4 p.m.
Children's Day & Ice Cream Social at Pleasant Home

Join us for Children's Day and the Pleasant District Ice Cream Social where history comes to life. Families can take part in the crafts, games, and activities of a late 19th-century child, from chores like carpet beating to games like hoop rolling.

This free event is co-sponsored by the Historical Society, Pleasant Home Foundation, Wonder Works Children's Museum, and the Park District of Oak Park. 

To order tickets for these events or to get additional information, please visit our website at www.oprfhistory.org or call (708) 848-6755

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We welcome your comments and suggestions. Please write us at the address shown above or email us at: oprfhistorymatters@sbcglobal.net and use the keyword "newsletter" in the subject line.



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The fire crew posing in front of the firehouse for Oak Park's legendary photographer, Philander Barclay, in late 1903.

Help Us Spread the Word About Our Future Home
Go to Our Website at www.oprfhistory.org to Contribute

Thank you all for your generous contributions to our continuing project turning the old firehouse at Lake and Lombard into your New Home for History. You make it possible for the renovation work to continue.

If you attended one of our recent open houses, you have seen the progress we've already made. You can begin to see our museum and research center taking shape from the rubble of the former offices that had hidden the historic beauty of this building for decades. We've come a long way, but there is still much more to be done.

Please help us broaden our public outreach. Share what we are doing with your friends and neighbors. Encourage them to join our effort and make a contribution to our capital fund campaign. Share a link to our fundraising page at www.oprfhistory.com on your Facebook or Twitter or Instagram pages.

And, if you haven't yet contributed, please consider making a donation. Every dollar raised brings us closer to the opening of a museum and research center worthy of the rich and colorful history of the remarkable villages of Oak Park and River Forest.