PRESERVATION
RACINE NEWS

WINTER 2016
Volume 6

Christmas Greetings from Mary Christmas

In Preservation Racine's Newsletters, we often talk about landmark buildings, monuments, parks or cemeteries and the people who envisioned, built and preserved them. Usually these people have the where-with-all to help develop their ideas and build that structure, which adds to the attractiveness of Racine County. Yet, the wealth of a community is also the contributions of the people who live within its space. The holiday season is a wonderful time to remember a Racine lady named Mary Christmas, who made a difference in many people's lives.

On November 30, 1936, the *Racine Journal Times* wrote an article, "Racine's Mary Christmas Busy Helping to Make a Merry Christmas for Others." Mary Christmas was born Mary Myrtle Eldred on November 12, 1887, in Grand Rapids, Michigan. On November 4, 1910 Mary married William Kiley in Grand Rapids, coming to Racine and becoming a widow with two small children under four years old and one child that would be born five months after his father's death. Mary worked in a restaurant to support her family, when one day after the last customer had left, she sat down to rest and fell asleep. A stranger came in and seeing no one, he looked around and found Mary sleeping. He introduced himself as Uncle Sam Christmas. That is what the neighborhood children, his nieces and nephews called him. Sam Christmas was born in London, England and can be found in the Racine City Directory as living at 1113 Marquette Street and working as a laborer. Mary and Sam soon married, giving Mary her special name. To avoid jokes about her name, Mary used her middle name Myrtle, which is how you will find her listed in the city directories from 1921 through1928, where the name Mary first appears. She and Sam would have three additional children but would lose one son.

To help support the family, Mary operated a wax flower business and so had a phone connected under her name. Mary Christmas is quoted as saying, "The telephone would ring almost continuously, night and day." Children would often call asking if she was Mrs. Santa and she would tell them she was

and they better be good 'cause Santa was watching. The letters she received she answered by saying "Santa was so busy that she wrote for him." When the depression hit, the phone had to be disconnected, but she continued to answer the letters.

It was an Associated Press story that gave Mary nationwide publicity. More and more letters were received every day. The November 1936 newspaper article noted that "the Christmas family is in humble circumstances and will not have much in a material way at the holiday season," yet even then they were deluged with mail from as far away as North China

and Hawaii. It is reported that Mary answered every letter personally. Mary was invited to a special program in Chicago and later to New York for a holiday celebration, all expenses paid. Mary's Christmas card list included shut-ins, invalids, prisoners, disabled veterans, children's classrooms, orphans and hospital patients. Her mailing list grew to over 7,000 people, who she would send holiday cards to. Sam Christmas often helped Mary with the mailings. Generous community donations of cards (especially from Western Printing) and stamps from merchants and the community helped her continue her work. In 1936 Mary founded the Mary Christmas Shut-in Club, which continued until her death. Shortly before she died, on August 20, 1959 Mary Christmas was honored by the U. S. House of Representatives with remarks about her devoted work. The City of Racine honored her as "Mother of the Year."

The city directories indicate that the Christmas family lived at 10 different addresses during their years in Racine, with the majority of the time spent at 1519 Hamilton Street, near the Hartman Trunk Company operation. That house has been razed.

The first recorded house that Mary and Sam Christmas lived in after they got married: 1624 Grand Avenue.

What an amazing story about how someone can take serendipity, such as a name, and use it for good and shine a bright light on our community.

Vivian Merlo, thanks to Gerry & Marie Karwowski

Just Around the Corner …

There were Surprises

With almost everything within walking distance for this year's Tour of Historic Places, the title *Just Around the Corner* begged to be chosen. The warm and sunny weather made the walks a pleasure and it was a year of surprise discoveries, too.

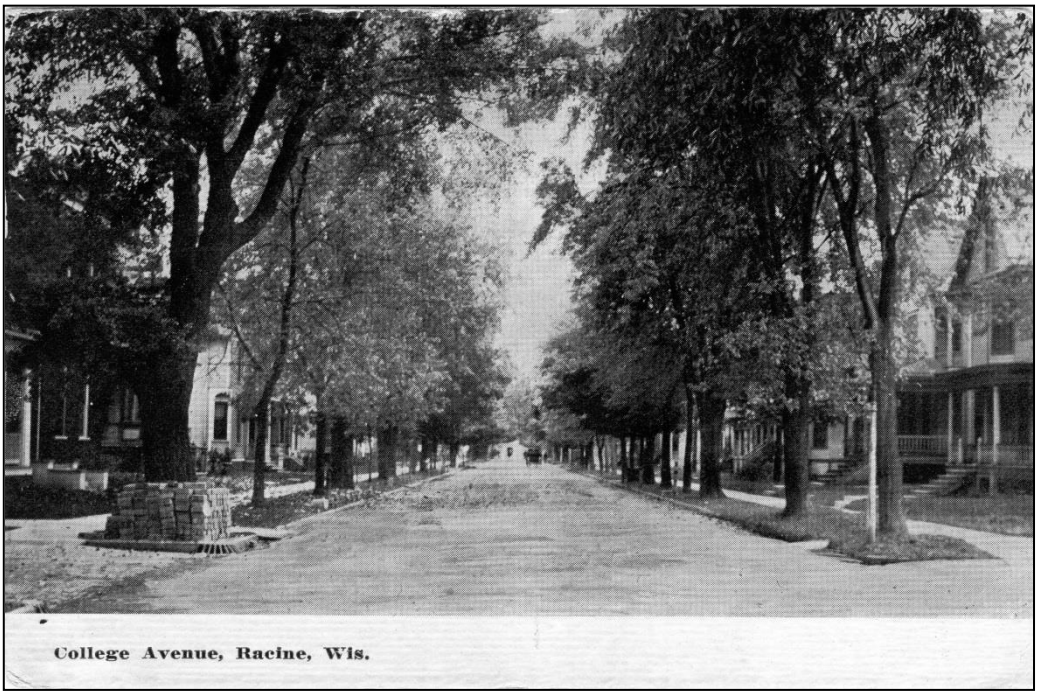
- At the Charles and Imogene Carpenter House, renovations after water damage unexpectedly revealed a period chimneypiece in the kitchen, possibly dating back before the large neoclassical enlargement of 1896.
- The Wheeler-Bull House turned out to have begun as two separate neighboring houses that were grafted together by the Bull family in 1903.
- At the Emily Baker ("Christmas") House, a sealed-up tunnel, probably leading to the lake, from the cellar (an early owner, Mayor Alexander J. Horlick, is said to have been known for fine liquor during Prohibition …), and a previously unknown photo of the house showed that Mayor Horlick had quadrupled its size, too, with extensions to match the original design thrown out to the south, east, and north.
- The Blake House proudly displayed its reconstructed front porch in time for the tour (see our report on the porch elsewhere in this publication). Then, rather excitingly, visitors offering reminiscences of life in the New York tenements generated the sudden revelation that the rather odd "bathroom" on the Blake House second floor, might, in fact, have been a historically significant kitchen-bathroom hybrid, possibly dating back to when the house first became apartments.

All of these discoveries now await further research, and we will keep you posted. Perhaps no other tour has produced so many wonderful surprises.

Pippin Michelli

College Avenue Bricks II

In the winter 2011 *Preservation Racine Newsletter* an article was an article was written concerning the bricks on College Avenue. The area of concern at that time was the intersection of College Avenue and Fifteenth Street. The city's recommendation was to use stamped-concrete imitation brick for the repair instead of using original brick pavers. A meeting was arranged for interested citizens to preview the imitation brick near the Gleason Contractors location. It was not felt that this would be a viable solution as the color was too pale and the stamping too shallow to create a convincing effect. In 2003 Paul and Mary Zens had worked diligently on researching and saving the College Avenue bricks, when they were threatened with resurfacing. They gathered signatures from the area residents and implored the city to save the historic street.



Vintage Post Card showing College Avenue unpaved with the bricks at the road side, waiting to be set in place.

At that time, the Zens found the city engineer of Rock Island, Illinois, with seventeen miles of brick streets, willing to share his city's information. This data included inspection schedules, maintenance and techniques on how and when to repair historic brick streets. Paul Zens passed this information to the Head of the Department of Public Works, and the mayor was offered a second copy. As a result, the repair at the intersection of College Avenue and Fifteenth Street was made reusing the original brick pavers.

In 2016 the College Avenue bricks came under a new threat when the city budgeted a future repair of the sewer running under the street. After meeting Mayor Dickert and Department of Public Works Head John Yehlen to express their concerns, the residents were delighted that their anxieties were heard and the happy ending of this story is that the city found a way to line the sewer without damaging the brick street.

But the scare showed just how easily the bricks could be lost. Don Schumacher, President of Preservation Racine and a member of the Racine Landmarks Commission, has therefore proposed designating the College Avenue bricks as Racine Historic Artifacts since the previously approved ordinance requiring the city to maintain the historic character of the street has not served as a viable protection. The Landmarks Commission has deferred the discussion for one month in order to draft the best possible proposal to submit to the Common Council.

Vivian Merlo and Pippin Michelli

From the President: end of year update

Preservation Racine had a very good year at several levels. But we still have work to do and need support from our members.

At the highest level, the what-you-see level, we have had very good year:

- The Blake House porch was built
- Newsletters – interesting articles and information sent to members and shared with the community four times a year
- Century Buildings Awards program – those of you who have never attended this program, held at our May meeting, are missing a great event
- The Tour – this year's tour was very successful and could not have happened without over 200 volunteers, many of whom were not even members. See more in the tour article in this issue
- Programs – we have 8-9 programs every year open to members and non-members. They are fun and educational

At the next level, the what-you-may-not-see-but-should level:

- The Preservation Racine website – we have worked to make our website better and are now working on a redesign to make the site even better. If you have not visited the site, please do: www.preservationracine.org
- Preservation Racine Facebook page – the Facebook page has been restarted and is seeing activity. We are able to share information with a wide range of people. Facebook address: Preservation-Racine-Inc. Log on and like us
- New Revenue Committee – this group is looking at ways for us to better connect with business in the area. A by-product of this is a better definition of Preservation Racine and what we do and why it is important

At the last level, the what-you-don't-see level, we need support from members. This is the area that we need to improve in order to make Preservation Racine sustainable:

- Three year plan – we developed a three year plan a few years ago with the goal of improving how our board and group function. We reviewed what Preservation Racine did in the past and plotted a path forward. We are revisiting this plan and hope to have ideas and recommendations to share at a general meeting early next year.
- Working committees – our working committees are doing a good job but are under staffed. Following is a list of some committees and what they do. I invite you to contact me to become a member of a committee.
- Membership – greet people at membership meetings and contact potential members
- Publications – in the past we have published pamphlets. We need someone that would help us update some old pamphlets and create some new ones
- Archives – work with the Preservation Racine archives to file the history we collect and help move us towards digital filing
- Programs – this committee finds ideas for programs and locations to host them. They also need more people to bring refreshments
- Tour – currently, we need to fill the tour chair as well as the subcommittees for the 2017 tour. Work has already started on finding the buildings. The committee needs to be up and running in January. Chairing the tour is a lot of work but can be very rewarding

As you can see, there is a lot that goes on out of sight. The people that are working on the committees are dedicated and hardworking. We need to support them.

Don Schumacher
preservationracine@gmail.com , 262-634-5748

THE NANNY OF THE BLAKE HOUSE

"The Nanny of the Blake House" that is what Preservation Racine Board member and coordinator of properties Porter Venn dubs himself.

Venn along with his committee: Roberta and Jim Fiene, Edgar Hoffman, Norm Seeger and Blake House Manager representing First Weber, Peggy Robbins, provide constant care for the Blake House property … and it can be a demanding "baby".

Venn tells the story of one dark, windy and stormy night when after a committee meeting at the House they were confronted with a very large "wooden object" in the front hall. It was discovered that the "object" was the hatch from the tower of the house. The hatch had blown out into the front yard in the strong wind and some kind passerby had dragged it into the hall.

Jim and Porter knew that a heavy rainstorm was predicted and without that hatch secured in the tower the rain would pour in and their "ward", The Blake House, would be deluged. So in the dark, climbing very old narrow stairs, cautiously stepping across aging beams the two brave men hoisted the hatch up to the house's tower. They were able in that perilous position to rig the hatch temporarily so that the rain did not flood the house and secured it until someone could be hired to affix the hatch permanently

Hiring contractors also comes under the purview of this committee as was the case when their "baby" developed severe sewer and plumbing problems a couple of years ago. The sewer pipe had deteriorated over the years. This required the hiring of contractors to tear up the cement floor in the basement, install new PVC piping, deep-trench from the north side of the house to Main Street and restore the lawn when the project was complete.

Three tenants occupy the Blake House along with the offices of Preservation Racine. Their safety and welfare is also a constant concern of the committee.

The Tour of Historic Places this year included a visit to Preservation Racine offices on the second floor of the Blake House. This required a "spiffing up" of that sometimes difficult and unruly "ward".

Porter and his committee went to work hiring and overseeing the construction of the new Blake House porch designed by architect Bob Hartmann to replicate the earliest known porch of the house. A long- time dream of Preservation Racine, the porch's construction was approved by the membership at the December 2015 membership meeting and completed and show cased at the 2016 tour in September.

"Spiffing up" included restoring the back steps with durable nonskid permanent material and coating, securing help to clean all the carpeting in the halls and on the stairs and to clean Preservation Racine's offices. The newel posts and railings on the bannister to the second floor were tightened. Porter transported a fanning mill to display in the front yard for the tour and then hustled it into the house when it began to rain. To be able to coordinate with the new porch the north and south bay windows were scraped and painted with a "nick in time" completion the day before the tour. At this time window weights are being installed for the windows facing east and the apartment windows facing south.

Often there are needs for the tenants … a new refrigerator, a new stove here and there … along with other needs a landlord faces…snow removal, lawn care. All is overseen and accomplished by this loyal group of members.

Their work may be included on the list in this issue's President's letter at the level … "What-you-may-not-see-but-should-have".

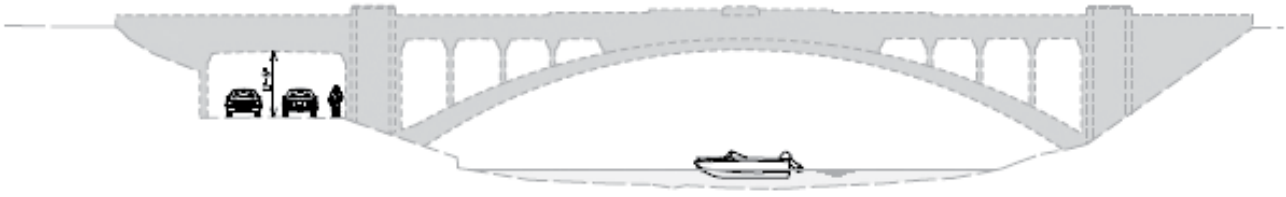
Much must be attributed to this conscientious "Nanny" and his team of co-workers who "watch over the Blake House". It is a devoted committee and crew who all deserve our gratitude and appreciation.

Heather Egan.

West Sixth Street Bridge, Update

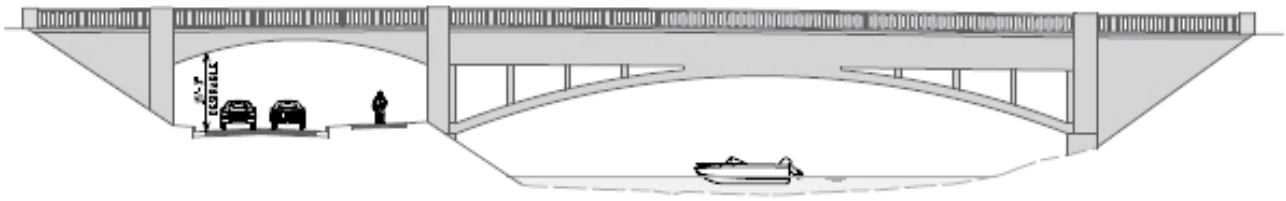
Following the first charrette meeting to present the design proposal for the future West Sixth Street bridge, the City of Racine held a public input meeting on Wednesday 26th October. On this occasion, Ayres Associates presented a revised design proposal reflecting the public input of the previous meeting. At this stage, the designs are possibilities only but they have been drawn up with likely future funding in mind, so they are a useful indication of what the city hopes to achieve. We are grateful to Ayres Associates and to City Engineer John Rooney for permission to publish the renderings here.

West 6th Street Bridge, Potential Design Renderings by Ayres Associates

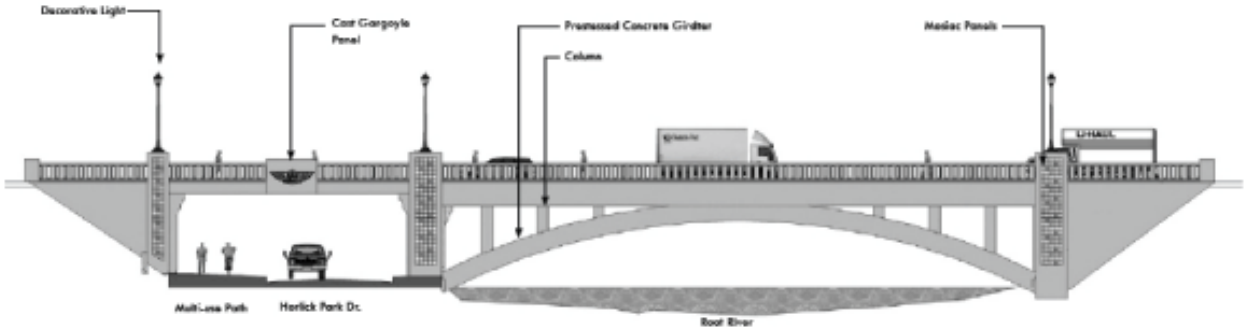


(1) ELEVATION – EXISTING BRIDGE

(2) ELEVATION – BASIC BRIDGE CONCEPT



(3) ELEVATION – POTENTIAL ALTERNATIVE BRIDGE CONCEPT



(4) ELEVATION – POTENTIAL ALTERNATIVE BRIDGE CONCEPT

The renderings show a silhouette of the existing bridge, followed by one showing the basic structure of any new bridge on the site before it has been "clothed" with design. The span over Horlick Park Drive will be considerably wider with a pedestrian/ cycle way alongside the road. To meet code, that part of the bridge needs an extra 3-4 ft. of clearance, which is achieved by setting a more slender road deck above and a recessed road below. The third rendering shows the design "clothing" proposed at the first charrette meeting, which sought to reflect the original design with curtain arches that evoked the original piercings with stained recesses.

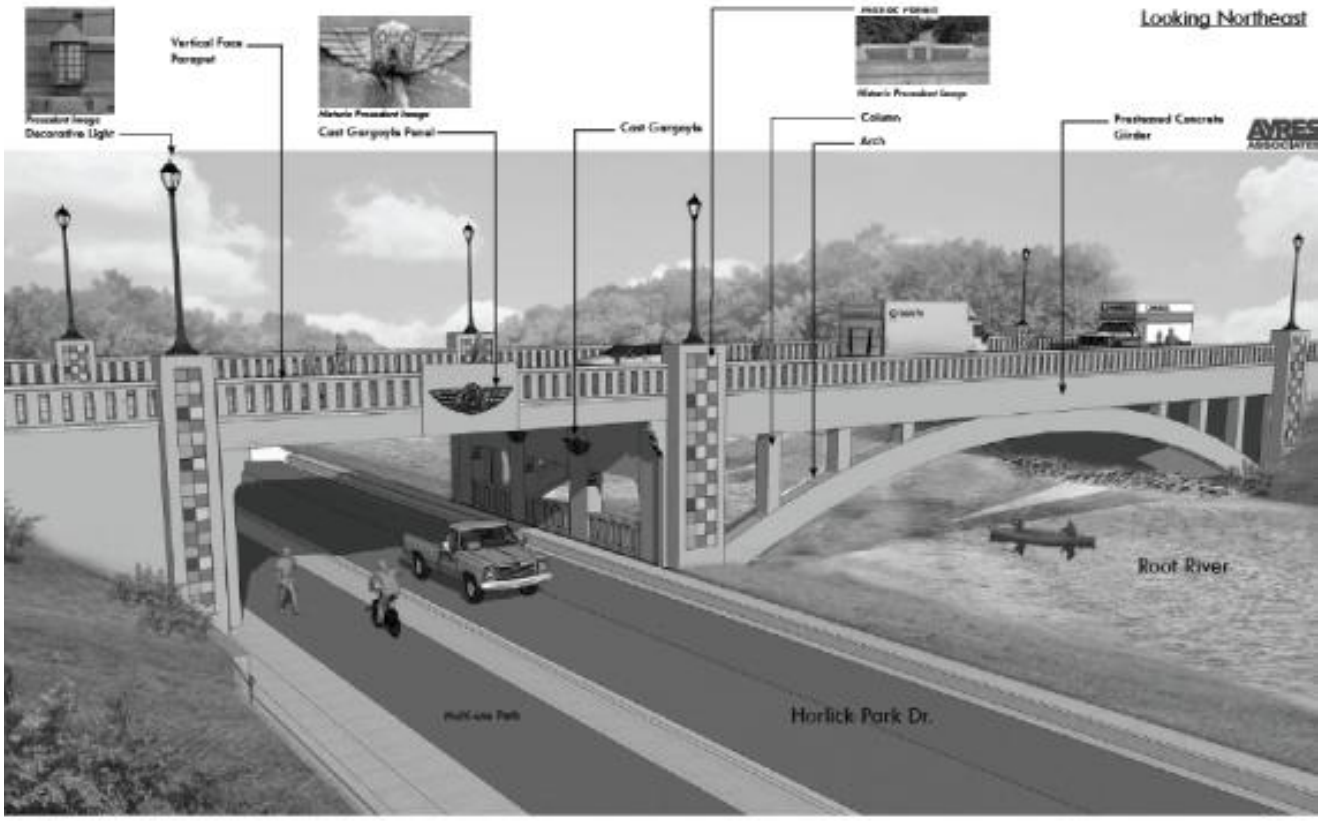
The fourth rendering shows the proposed revision, variant (a). For this proposal, the ground under Horlick Park Drive would be made considerably lower which would achieve a slight increase in the height of the bridge as a whole. As a result, the arch can be bolder and the piercings can be real. Thickening the piers gives them a better visual emphasis and creates a field for mosaic tiles to evoke those currently on the inside wall of the road deck. A copy of one of the terracotta moldings would now crown each side of the span over Horlick Park Drive, street lights would top the piers, similar to those that once graced the original bridge.

The fifth rendering shows variant (b), where the mosaic tiles on the piers are larger and more brightly colored. The oblique view of this rendering shows that the main bridge supports would also be pierced, and this is also envisaged for variant (a). Also in both variants, displays about the bridge and the area around it are planned for the inside wall of the Horlick Park Drive abutment.

The project takes into account the value of the local context, including the parks by designed Jens Jensen and the archeological site near the bridge that defines the area of a mid-Woodland period American Indian campsite or village (300 BC to 1200 AD). A similar, much earlier archeological site now lies outside the area of impact.

Pippin Michelli

West 6th Street Bridge, Potential Design Rendering by Ayres Associates



(5) ELEVATION — POTENTIAL ALTERNATIVE BRIDGE CONCEPT 2

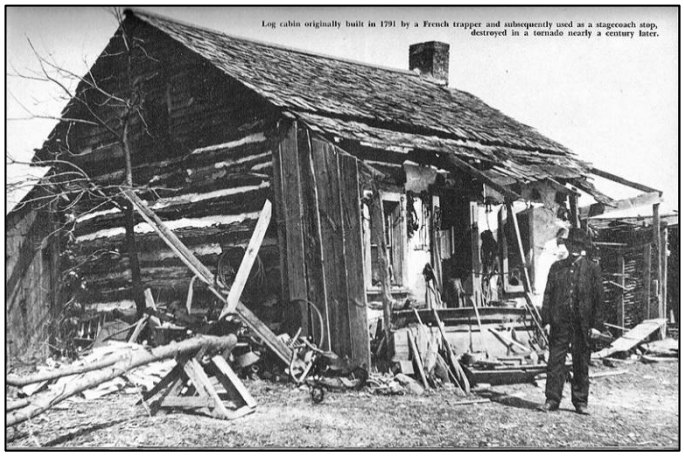
New Light on Racine's Earliest Buildings

The story of the foundation of Racine and its earliest settlers is widely known and accepted – or is it? November's membership meeting presented Joel Belaire, whose research into his and his wife's family history led him to question the traditional account of the founding of Racine and its earliest settlers.

The events concern a family whose eldest sons had a distinctive name made from the combined names of their first American progenitors, Edmond and Elizabeth Basye. This couple had two children, Margaret and Elizamond, both of whom had children implicated in the mystery of the first log cabin in the future city of Racine. Margaret had one daughter by her first husband, William Hodge, and several sons and daughters by her second husband, Rayford Price. Of these, the eldest son was Lismond Price, whose surname was later changed to McKim and whose own children were Sarah and John Lismond McKim. Elizamond Basye also had several children, including a son named Sam Basye. It was Lismond (Price) McKim and Sam Basye whose lives brought them from Indiana to Racine where they each made claims.

The land for Racine was ceded in 1833 and although a three-year transition period was stipulated, a small number of early settlers arrived almost immediately to make their claims. Among them were Gilbert Knapp and Joel Sage, as we know. But there were also Sam and Lismond, whose presence complicates the established story.

The established story was inaugurated in a speech by Judge Charles E. Dyer at a meeting of the "Old Settlers Society" on February 22, 1871. The society had been founded on March 14, 1870, by a group of Racine pioneers. Significantly, these included Gilbert Knapp, Joel Sage, and Sam Basye. They were all in the audience for that speech which endorsed Gilbert Knapp's claim to be the founder of Racine, its first permanent settler, and the builder of its first log cabin.



Fur trapper's log cabin a little to the north of Racine. Built in 1791, it survived till the tornado of 1883.

By re-examining this speech in the context of the Basye and McKim family histories, Joel Belaire presented an intriguing alternative possibility that although Gilbert Knapp was indeed the first "permanent" settler to build a log cabin in Racine, the evidence suggests there was an earlier cabin built by a non-permanent settler: an unnamed "Hoosier" (person from Indiana) who sold his claim to Joel Sage in May 1835. Joel Belaire argues that this Hoosier was none other than Indiana man Lismond (Price) McKim, since he and his cousin Sam Basye were the only other settlers at the time. Since Lismond and Sam appear to have arrived by boat, and the Lake was not ice-free until April, it seems almost inescapable that Lismond must have made his claim, complete with log cabin, during the summer of 1834. Lismond went on to make a documented claim further north in September 1835 but had to return to Indiana a few years later owing to ill health, so he never became a "permanent" settler. The honor of building the first log cabin in the city of Racine therefore went to Joel Sage, who built his cabin in November 1834.

Joel Belaire is preparing a book for publication that includes a chapter on these events. We wish him every success and look forward to the no-doubt heated debates that will follow this new light on the history and founding of Racine.

Pippin Michelli

"Just Around the Corner"
2016 Tour a Great Success

829 guests visited our 2016 tour sites. The **gracious home owners and cooperative public sites** lead the top of our acknowledgement list. **Extra thanks to the Masonic Center** who opened the remarkable Durand Home for tours and hosted our after celebration; we are most blessed to have their partnership support preserving Racine's heritage. **Deepest THANKS to:** committee chairpersons and coordinators, committee members, researchers, site captains, community businesses, advertisers and supporters, members of Preservation Racine who helped, and many non-member volunteers-the tour could not happen without their efforts.

Tour information that will help you understand **what made the 2016 tour a SUCCESS:**

- 2016 Tour had a record number of tour guides that allowed guests to see and learn about our sites. The day of tour staff was **61% non-member supported**. Without the tremendous generosity of these folks the tour could not happen! From researching, to site captains, to the day of tour working staff, non-members carry our mission of doing the tour.
- The tour had a **record financial year**. The combination of a strong attendance and getting the tour done under budgeted costs worked to advantage. The expense of the Blake House Porch Restoration undertaken this year will benefit from that. Our committee is proud that the tour provided fiscal support but more importantly the **tour is a time to**:
    - **educate** the community about the need for preservation
    - **honor** sites that have maintained their original integrity
    - **research** and learn more about buildings on the tour
    - **highlight** the importance of sustaining our community
- Those attending this year had the opportunity to read signage along the tour route that gave them a glimpse of the history of the Southside neighborhood. There were some awesome residences that once existed in that area that have been removed. Citizens need to be attentive to that lesson to actively pursue steps that ensure the continuation of places and artifacts of importance in the Racine community.
- **Real Racine** gave a **grant** that allowed tour promotion outside of Racine. Guests from as far as Texas and Massachusetts attended--2% of our guests were from states other than Wisconsin and Illinois. There was no data prior to the last 2 years but zip code collection processes last year and this year shows that there was an increased attendance this year from Milwaukee County, western Racine County, Kenosha and Pleasant Prairie. For this success we owe a **big thanks to the work of our marketing committee**.
- 2016 **on-line sales doubled**. PayPal sales were introduced in 2015. We thank **the ticket outlet sites** and floral arrangement contributors for their engagement in the tour effort.
- Tour booklets were given to tour guests. For security reasons the addresses and home owner names were not published prior to the tour. Booklets were available to members at the November membership meeting and will be available at the December meeting. If you did not attend the tour or the recent meeting and would like a copy, one can be mailed to you. Contact President Don Schumacher via Preservation Racine's email or voice message system: email preservationracine@gmail.com, 262-634-5748.

It is time to begin **work on the 2017 tour**. If you see this as a significant effort of the Preservation Racine organization, please **volunteer your leadership service** to next year's tour in the West Racine area. Contact Don Schumacher: preservationracine@gmail.com, 262-634-5748

Bev Schumacher and Sybil Knop

Glimpses of the Tour Day

On the tour day we were proud to show off the new historically authentic porch, which completes our forty-year project to bring Blake House as near as possible to its original or early appearance.

Two fascinated tour guests listen as our guide tells them about the St. Luke's Hospital library.

Lincoln expert Steven Rogstadt gave tour visitors a talk about the statue, which is a rare example of the two Lincolns together.

Photographs by Jim Wardrip

Coming Up - Preservation Racine Membership Meetings

Monday, December 5, 2016, 7:00 p.m.
Christmas House,116 Tenth Street
Jim Mercier will talk about the history of the Christmas House
Several nurses who lived there when it was a nurses' residence will talk about some their experiences

Monday, February 6, 2017, 7:00 p.m.
D P Wigley, 234 Wisconsin Avenue

Monday, March 6, 2016, 7:00 p.m.
General Pershing will pay us a visit

Century Buildings

On May 1, 2016, Preservation Racine will host its thirtieth annual presentation of Century Building certificates in observance of National Preservation Month. The Century Building committee looks for nominations of buildings that are at least 100 years old, well maintained or restored and located in the City or County of Racine. To nominate a building, please leave a message with

Heather Egan, 554-8276, mhegan313@yahoo.com or Pippin Michelli, 456-7419, michelli@plinia.net

Preservation Racine members who would enjoy working on this committee and helping to identify and research the buildings may send an email to Heather or Pippin to be kept up to date about meetings, etc.

Preservation Racine Facebook Page!

Among President Don Schumacher's list of what-you-may-not-see-but-should is our re-launched Facebook page. We are pleased to note that this page is seeing increased traffic, thus allowing us to present our group to a wider audience in a more favorable light. It will reach a less mature audience, enticing new members from new demographics. It even shows video highlights from some meetings.

John Mintier

realracine
America's Kringle Capital

Real Racine is pleased to have helped promote two Preservation Racine events this year: the *Century Buildings Awards* and the *Tour of Historic Places*.

Visit our location at I-94 on Highway 20 or you can visit us regularly on the web at ***www.realracine.com***

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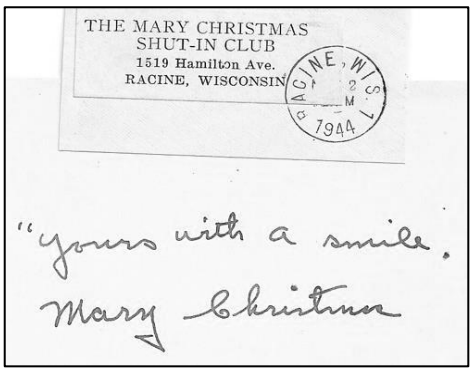

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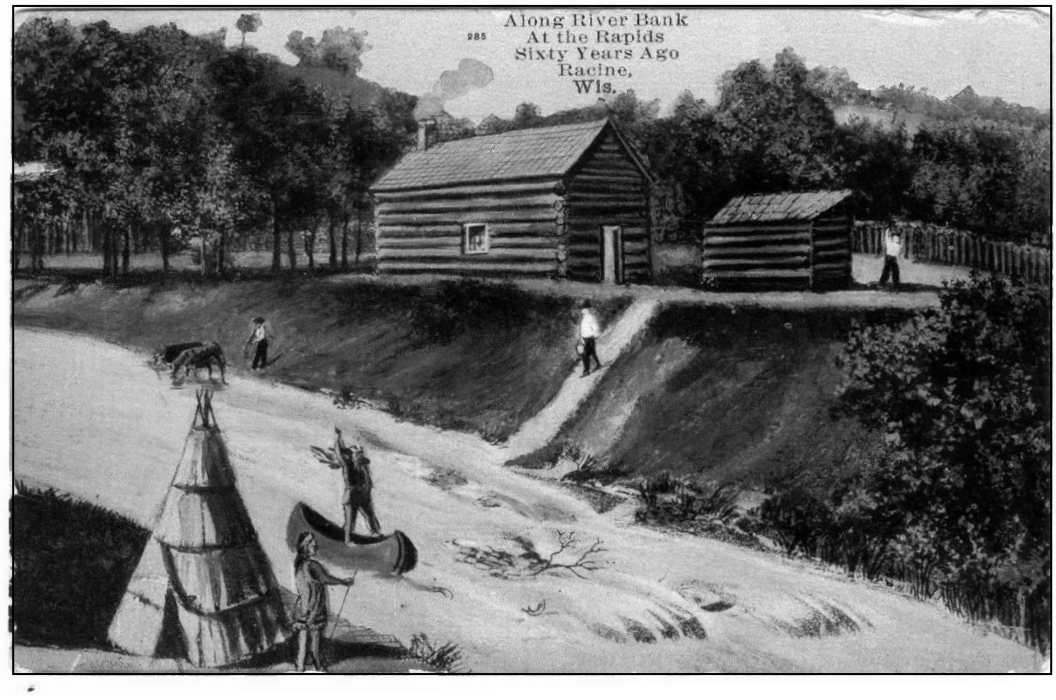
"Along River Bank at the Rapids Sixty Years Ago, Racine, Wis." Card is postmarked 1914.