

A History of the Peoria Historical Society

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“A spot of local history is like an inn upon a highway; it is a stage upon a far journey; it is a place the national history has passed through. There mankind has stopped and layed by the way.” These words, spoken by Woodrow Wilson, ring true for a plethora of historical societies. Although the Peoria Historical Society (PHS) had a relatively rocky start, it eventually got its footing and began its long journey through the past. Along the way in history the PHS has diligently recorded and documented the history of Peoria County. It has collected items from different eras of Peoria’s history and attentively educated any interested person about Peoria’s past. Since 1934, the culture of Peoria has been greatly enriched by the PHS; because of this society, queries have been answered, old buildings have been saved, and interests in Peoria’s history have grown.

The PHS has several different facilities, one of which is the Flanagan House Museum. In the early 1960s, the local newspaper put on a contest to find the oldest house in Peoria. The winner was the John C. Flanagan House, built circa 1837. The PHS held several fundraising events to purchase this house. Enough money was finally raised in 1962. This house is used more as a museum of artifacts than of what everyday life was like in the 1830s. The Flanagan House is not only a museum but also the headquarters for the PHS and the Peoria chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution. The

other house museum that the PHS owns is the Pettengill-Morrison House located at 1212 Moss Avenue in Peoria. Jean Morrison was the last owner of the house and Moses Pettengill was the builder. The PHS was included in Ms. Morrison's will; she gave her house and furnishings to the historical society in January 1966. The Pettengill-Morrison House showcases pre-Civil War artifacts that were left in the house. The final place that the PHS owns or has claim on is the special collections at Bradley University's library, which has housed their official library since 1980. This collection has over seven thousand items including books, pamphlets, letters, diaries and maps involving Peoria County and Central Illinois. Occasionally the government, museums, or book writers will go there to find information for their books or exhibits. For a relatively small town the PHS was very proud that its library is of some use to the national museums and publishers.

There were several different societies called the Peoria Historical Society before 1934. The first version of the PHS was the Peoria Scientific and Historical Society in 1893. It later branched out and separated. While the science portion was going strong the historical side collapsed briefly after going out on its own. In the next couple years several other Peoria Historical Societies unsuccessfully came into existence. After that, there was a period with no historical society at all in Peoria. At that time Peorians were still finding and uncovering artifacts in their houses, but they had no place to take these items. Though Paul M. Angle was the librarian for the Illinois State Historical Society, he did a great deal for the PHS. For instance, he organized a dinner and lecture for those interested in starting a local historical society in January 1934. That night the first president was elected and the PHS of today was created. At the first annual meeting later

that year one hundred charter members were announced. After that, the society was relatively dormant as the war and post-war activities went on. Later on, most of their little money was spent on purchasing the Flanagan house. Because of its spending in the mid-1960s PHS stayed more or less dormant in the 1970s. However, starting in 1980 it participated in an archaeological dig. The purpose of these digs was to find artifacts from the Native Americans and the early French fur traders that lived in the area.

The main idea of the PHS is basically to store and showcase artifacts that relate to the history of that area. A large portion of PHS' items came from the former societies. Said items were stored at the Peoria Public Library where they were slowly forgotten and later rediscovered. When these artifacts were rediscovered, they were given to the PHS. When an item is taken in, the relevance to Peoria history is thought about and whether or not it can be stored. Previously, items were catalogued by hand on paper and were often illegible. Recently, a new computer cataloguing system called Past Perfect was purchased. The question now is, who controls all this? The answer is Bob Killion. He does the research on an item to find its relevance to Peoria's history. He is also in charge of putting things into the computer after they have been accessioned. There are approximately six people on the collections committee. They decide if the item in question will be accessioned or not.

Since 1934 the culture of Peoria has been greatly enriched by the PHS; because of this society, queries have been answered, old buildings have been saved, and interests in Peoria's history have grown. As the culture of Peoria has flourished, so has the historical society's size. It grew from only having an executive board to a couple hundred members in almost seventy-five years. Although Peoria is not a particularly large city, it

has a rich past and dedicated members of its historical society to document this history. With some help from the Illinois State Historical Society, PHS has helped the past to be remembered. Thus is the duty of any historical society anywhere. As Paul M. Angle said, “The duty of a local historical society is to preserve the present as well as the past because the records of today become the history of tomorrow. [From Keith L. Barr, “Historical Society Keeps Peoria in Perspective,” *The Peoria Times Observer*, July 15, 1992; Amy Kelly, Student Historian’s interview, Sept. 19, 2008; Bob Killion, Student Historian’s interview, Sept. 19, 2008; George W. May, *Students History of Peoria County, Illinois; Peoria Historical Society*. The Peoria Historical Society. <<http://peoriahistoricalsociety.org/phshistory.html>>. (Sept. 18, 2008); and The Peoria Historical Society, *The Peoria Historical Society*.]

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