

## **A History of the Peoria Historical Society**

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No one can deny that the origins of any city are the foundations for the actual city itself. So, who kept the history of Peoria alive and still continues to influence its growth? It is no other than the Peoria Historical Society (PHS). Peoria's history is truly based on its preservers. Since history plays such a fundamental role in understanding present life, the efforts of the PHS in preserving Peoria's past are especially crucial; however, few know the history behind these preservers of the past.

Every city has a story behind it. The beginning was assembled based on the city's history. Peoria's unique story was initiated with the history of the PHS. The PHS's roots can be traced back to 1839. It became an official corporation in 1934 with the primary goal being to retain Peoria's past. It all began with a postcard, which was mailed to seventy-five people and stated that a meeting would be held at a local university for people interested in history. Only nineteen people came, but this small group took on the behemoth role of creating a historical society. In the 1950s, the PHS experienced a growth in membership. Percival Rennick became the first president of this big society. This immense number of people also led the PHS to think about illustrating Peoria's history by showing historical objects in a museum. Therefore, at a meeting in 1951, the PHS discussed ways to start a museum.

Gradually, the PHS collected enough money to buy the John Flanagan House, in 1962, for \$15,000. The house was constructed by Judge John Flanagan on October 16, 1837. The PHS purchased it in 1901. Since 1990, it has been Peoria's oldest standing residence and the PHS's headquarters. Many historical object collections have been shown here. Some objects were preserved from the pre-Civil War period. For instance, one exhibit contained a child's bedroom and an old kitchen from 1840. Another exhibit displayed antique glass, china, furniture, toys, and clothing. Many of the objects in this museum also came from archeological digs the PHS performed in 1980 to search for historical objects. Numerous early objects of the French settlement and the 1812 War artifacts were added to the museum. As a reward for its achievements, the Flanagan Museum was given a certificate for distinguished service to American history on October 5, 1963. Besides this honor, this museum was placed on the National Register of Historic Sites in 1976 because of its old age and fine condition.

Likewise, the PHS acquired the Pettengill-Morrison House in 1966, which was constructed by Moses Pettengill in 1868. The last owner was Jean Morrison, who lived there until her death in 1966. The PHS took possession of the house's contents along with the house itself following her death. The preserved objects revealed the life style of two wealthy families. Exhibited here were fancy furniture, original rugs, collections of clothing from the 1700s, and Native American settlement objects. This museum first opened its doors in 1971. Later in 1987, through the PHS's extended tour offerings, special events, and exhibits sponsored by the award winning Peoria Garden Club, over 10,000 individuals visited the museum. Thus, a bronze plaque was awarded to the museum.

Although this historical society started its own history off fairly well, it came face to face with some challenges. For example, buying the two museums proved to be difficult because the PHS did not have many donations or much funding. In addition, this society was a non-profit organization. Therefore, the PHS depended on donations, grants, and government funds. A burglary of \$13,000 took place in early 2008 and made the PHS's financial situation worse. Thus, the society had to watch the money it spent on its projects and events. Yet, the PHS battled with these challenges. To name a few solutions, the PHS conducted annual active membership drives, organized extended tours to local and out of town people, gave antique seminars, and increased the events it held annually. In return, the PHS received a donation of over 12,000 items from the chamber of commerce. Because of this, the PHS expanded its museums collections. Furthermore, since the 1940s, government funds have amounted to \$10,000 annually. Last but not least, the PHS had to deal with a decrease in interest levels. After the 1950s, not many people showed interest in Peoria's history. Therefore, the PHS held essay contests to motivate students to learn about local history. Additionally, the PHS organized the Rennick Award Art competition and designed various art shows to entertain people while it tried to raise public awareness of Peoria history.

Even to this day, the PHS is still very active in local historical projects. The PHS continues to conduct narrated historic trolley tours of Peoria. Aside from this, the "Step Back into Peoria" and "Candlelight Tours" program teaches students about past contributors to Peoria's history. Both museums hold events that endorse the preservation of Peoria's history. These events show the establishment of Peoria. They also help people in Peoria realize that in order to have a "today" or "future," there must be a

“before.” In addition, they provide research possibilities for scholars. Furthermore, the PHS cooperates with other organizations to arrange some events. This adds another dimension to the understanding of Peoria’s past.

Of course, all stories must come to an end. Peoria’s historical story has come full circle, and links back to the PHS. However, the PHS’s story will never truly have an ending. The society will continue to flourish with Peoria’s history. Although some are not aware of it, the PHS shaped and still shapes Peoria’s history. Not only does the PHS preserve the past, but it is also paving the way for the future of Peoria. Since Peoria’s history impacts present day life in Illinois, the work of the PHS is absolutely necessary. [From Marilee Barger, “The Sidewalks of Peoria.” *Central Peoria Observer* Jan. 16, 1934; Amy Kelly, Student Historian’s interview, Sept. 19, 2008; Bob Killion, Student Historian’s interview, Sept. 19, 2008; R. Middleton, “Peoria Historical Society Needs Help!” *West Bluff Word* June 1982, The Peoria Historical Society, “The Peoria Historical Society,” <[www.peoriahistoricalsociety.org/aboutphs.html](http://www.peoriahistoricalsociety.org/aboutphs.html)> (Sept. 15, 2008); and “Peoria Historical Society,” *Observer* Oct. 4, 1978.]