

# Preserving the Past

## The Ypsilanti Historical Society

**BY BILL NICKELS**

### **Introduction**

I came to Ypsilanti in 1959 to attend Eastern Michigan University and subsequently married an Ypsi girl. We bought our first house at the same time that plans were being developed for the 1973 sesquicentennial celebration and Ypsilanti's historic buildings were being noticed. We learned that the Hemphill Street house we'd bought was a Dutch Colonial and that Ypsilanti was a veritable museum of nineteenth- and twentieth-century houses. Learning Ypsilanti's architectural history went hand in hand with learning our community's history. Following is how the Ypsilanti Historical Society (YHS) became the keeper of our local history.

### **Our History Is Saved**

The Northwest Territory was established in 1787. Thirty-six years into our country's expansion westward, in 1823, Ypsilanti was founded. In 1923, Ypsilanti acknowledged its one hundred years of history during a centennial celebration. Participating in the 1923 historical pageant probably inspired Louis White who, right after the pageant, developed a lifelong passion of keeping Ypsilanti-related written documents and visiting local cemeteries to collect genealogical information.

In 1957, the State of Michigan passed Public Act 213, which authorized local governing bodies to "raise and appropriate money" and help with "any activity or project which...tends to advance historical interests of the community." On January 19, 1960, Louis White asked the Ypsilanti City Council to form a history-based city commission. Council then directed Mayor Rodney Hutchinson to appoint a history commission that would report to council. On February 2, 1960, the commission met, with Mayor Hutchinson as chair. Next, a subcommittee submitted a plan to establish a historical committee and the position of city historian. Council appointed members to this

committee and confirmed Louis White as Ypsilanti's first city historian in April 1960.

Michigan was founded in 1837, and it took the state more than one hundred years to encourage its residents to keep records of its history. It also took about hundred years of Ypsilanti history for Louis White to start what would eventually become the Ypsilanti Historical Society (YHS). On September 26, 1960, the historical committee met with the purpose of planning for a historical society to support them. On October 10, 1960, the historical committee created the YHS.

On January 26, 1961, the first regular meeting of YHS convened, and members elected its first set of officers. Foster Fletcher, owner of the Ypsilanti Credit Bureau, was elected the first president.

In 1962, Louis White moved his 30,000 notecards and armloads of old history books from his home to four small rooms in the Municipal Court Building, located at 206 North Huron. There, he was able to start cataloging his information. Over time, Louis White collected more than 1500 Ypsilanti area photos, which became the foundation of YHS's present day photo archives. After Louis died in 1963, Foster Fletcher became Ypsilanti's second city historian.

### **The Future in Its Past**

From the start, the museum and archive collections were assembled by donations. In the early 1960s, Lillian Bradley donated the Asher Aray collection. Asher Aray (1806–71) was a prosperous Black farmer living on a Michigan Avenue farm west of Carpenter Road. His donated collection revealed his wealth and participation in the Underground Railroad. The collection is an important piece of local and national history.

On March 19, 1963, in what appeared to be a minor YHS decision, Nathalie "Nat" and Dr. William "Bill" Edmunds were appointed as greeters for future YHS meetings. Independently, Nat and Bill would go on to use the city's history to promote Ypsilanti in many different ways.

Dr. Bradley Harris was elected YHS's second president on January 30, 1964. At the same meeting, Dr. William Edmunds urged members to attend a meeting on February 13 to start planning for Ypsilanti's sesquicentennial celebration in 1973. The planning group was called Project 73. At a local community meeting, Dr. Edmunds was quoted as saying, "The future of Ypsilanti is in its past."

On January 28, 1965, Mrs. Carl Miller (Phoebe) became YHS's third president. In November 1965, YHS presented the Ladies Literary Club with a historical marker to be placed on their clubhouse. That was the first such marker in Ypsilanti.

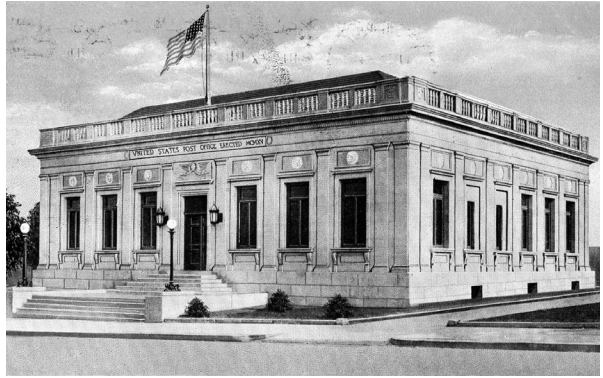
During the 1960s, the City of Ypsilanti acquired ownership of the buildings on North Huron Street above Riverside Park. The accumulated properties were approved for demolition and offered to developers to build a shopping mall. Residents were opposed to this idea, and, thankfully, it never came to fruition. One of the buildings that

was spared demolition was Ypsilanti's public library, the Ladies Library, at 130 North Huron. The library subsequently moved to the newly vacated post office on Michigan Avenue. The new library on Michigan Avenue had room in their basement to allow YHS to assemble a historical museum. Ypsilanti had their first historical museum in 1966!

The Ladies Library had prominently displayed a grand Tiffany window, originally commissioned and installed by Mary Ann Starkweather. To protect

the window, the city had it removed and displayed in the new historical museum.

John Elwell was elected YHS president in 1967, Shirley Pio followed as president in 1969, and Dr. William Edmunds became YHS president in 1969.



The first Ypsilanti Historical Society museum

## 220 North Huron

City Historian Foster Fletcher urged the City of Ypsilanti to allow YHS to use the Dow House at 220 North Huron as a new location for the YHS Historical Museum. In March 1970, YHS requested a twenty-five-year lease; the City of Ypsilanti limited the lease to renewable one-year leases because of "the potential for development." With the house having previously been broken up into apartments, Dr. Edmunds and his family led the conversion of the building into a museum, with the goal of having it ready for opening on August 13, 1972.

Eileen Harrison was elected president of the YHS in May 1970, and Allan Stewart was elected president in 1972.

YHS planned special events for every month of the 1973 sesquicentennial year. They included chair caning, needlepointing, quilting, candle making, Easter egg decorating, and bobbin lace making. During the July 1973 celebration, the museum was kept open from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. daily. Keeping the first hundred years of Ypsi's history alive, YHS had the centennial's *Story of Ypsilanti* publication, by Harvey C. Colburn, reprinted and available for purchase during the sesquicentennial. On the business side, YHS was granted tax exempt status by the IRS in 1973.

Mrs. Bradley Harris and Dr. William Edmunds served as YHS presidents in 1974, Elizabeth Warren was elected president in 1975, and Carl Scheffler became president in 1976.



220 North Huron

Many years earlier, in 1905, Adelaide Lewis, a widow and mother of six children, had purchased the home at 415 North Huron. Her second child, Evangeline Lewis, lived in the house until she decided to move into the Gilbert Residence, an assisted living community. Having no heirs, Evangeline first thought of deeding her house to YHS but changed her mind and offered it to Eastern Michigan University. EMU updated the kitchen, built a fence, and did general maintenance on the house. After all that investment, EMU changed its mind and suggested that YHS might again be interested in the house. In January 1977, YHS agreed to accept the house. The gift eventually was considered too much to manage, and YHS sold the house in 1989.

Ann McCarthy became YHS president in 1981, LaVerne Howard in 1982, and David Gauntlett in 1983. In 1985, the City of Ypsilanti made the members of their Historical Commission the same as the officers of YHS. The Historical Commission accomplished the goal of 1957's Public Act 213 as it "advanced the historical interests of Ypsilanti." The Historical Commission and the position of city historian were later removed from Ypsilanti's governmental structure with a new city charter.

Jack Miller was elected president in 1988, Peter Fletcher in 1990, Robert Fink in 1992, and Charles Kettles in 1993.

YHS was the recipient of a three bequests: a monetary gift from Frances Warren; the donation of a Saline house by Michael and Candace Marino; and another monetary

gift from Elizabeth Tunnieliff. Tunnieliff stipulated that her donation be used to create a children's display room, which became a favorite of youthful visitors. Peter Fletcher was president in 1996 and managed the money from these financial gifts and the earlier sale of the Lewis House. He kept the funds separate from the annual income and expenses. Bill Edmunds became president in 1998 and Michael Miller in 1999.

Another very important donor was Florence Babbitt, who was born in 1847, was married to Judge John Babbitt, and died in 1929. As a child, she had started collecting Ypsilanti artifacts and ultimately became known as Ypsilanti's best collector of memorabilia. Eastern Michigan University came into ownership of her collection, and in 1999, YHS sought to acquire it. The request was granted, and the items were permanently lent to YHS. They have become an important part of the YHF collection.

### **Major Step Forward**

Joan Carpenter became president in 2000, and Al Rudisill in 2004. Al was an organizational expert and was the right president for the time. During the next fourteen years, he led YHS in the major structural changes that elevated the professionalism of the museum and archives.

With a change in Michigan's tax structure, local governments such as Ypsilanti found themselves short of money. When that happened, the State of Michigan sometimes assigned financial managers to local governments. The powers of the financial managers superseded the powers of mayors and city councils, and these managers could do what was necessary to keep local governments solvent. YHS became concerned that Ypsilanti might be assigned a financial manager who would sell 220 North Huron to raise cash. It was time to purchase the property.

In 2006, with the generosity of members and YHS's investment account managed by Peter Fletcher, the society secured the future of the museum by purchasing the house at 220 North Huron. The price was \$250,000: \$125,000 down and \$125,000 in ten years. YHS was the beneficiary of two more trusts: the Doris Milliman Trust in 2002 and the Dolf and Anne Thorne Trust in 2006.

In addition to these gifts and donations, members of the YHS sought to raise funds themselves. Starting in 2001, YHS solicited household items to be sold in what became the YHS Annual Garage Sale, held as part of the Normal Park Neighborhood Garage Sale. Over the years, income from the sale ranged from about \$1,000 to as much as \$6,000 for a day of hard work. The sale continues to this day. For several years, YHS members also participated in State of Michigan-approved charitable gaming, which earned many thousands of dollars per session.

The professionalism of local historical museums is often limited by the leadership of nonprofessional volunteers. President Rudisill recognized that and entered into an agreement with Eastern Michigan University President Susan Martin whereby two

EMU Historic Preservation Program graduate students are hired, with the cost shared by EMU and YHS. The graduate students bring the expertise they learn in their classrooms to the YHS museum and archives, and they also gain valuable experience for their own future careers.

When the City of Ypsilanti had owned the building at 220 North Huron, city services always had priority over the maintenance of the building. Acquiring the property and its adjacent carriage house meant serious maintenance costs for the YHS.



**220 North Huron's Carriage House**

The main floor of the carriage house was then occupied by YHS's archives. It was decided to remodel the basement of 220 North Huron to accommodate the archives, thereby creating a rental apartment in the carriage house. That meant adding a bathroom to the basement and building an archives entrance addition with a lift to provide direct access to the new archives for all. This move was accomplished in 2007.

In 2008, the carriage house was remodeled and updated for two new rentals that would generate income for the operation of both the museum and archives.

Mary Ann Starkweather's Tiffany window had previously been moved from Michigan Avenue to the museum. It sat in an upstairs room with weakened lead joints that allowed the stained glass sections to squash like an accordion. YHS entered into a 2007 Trust Agreement with the City of Ypsilanti whereby YHS became responsible for maintaining and exhibiting the window. Denis Schmiedeke designed a display cabinet, which

Don Randazzo subsequently built and Ron Rupert stained and finished. All were professionals who volunteered their services.

In 2012, volunteer James Mann started his “Friday Night at the Movies,” showing old films in the Mae and Joe Butko Theater in the basement archives. The movies continue to this day. I was elected president in 2018 and still serve in this position.

For 2023, YHS will have available for sale their second reprint of the 1923 centennial publication, *The Story of Ypsilanti*. Along with the Ypsilanti Bicentennial Commission, YHS officers have also taken the lead in publishing *Ypsilanti Histories*, the 2023 bicentennial publication.

### **A Note on Sources**

Some information for this essay comes from the author’s memories; most of it is from YHS Board of Trustee’s meeting agendas and minutes. All images are provided by the Ypsilanti Historical Society Archives.

### **About the Author**

Bill Nickels is President of the Ypsilanti Historical Society and Professor Emeritus of Chemistry at Schoolcraft College. He served for ten years on the Ypsilanti Historic District Commission and twelve years on the Ypsilanti City Council (Ward 2). He is also a long-time member and past president of the Ypsilanti Heritage Foundation Board.