

## The First 30 years

On November 12, 1898 a group of Evanston residents met to form the Evanston Historical Society (EHS). On November 29th they held a community meeting at the Evanston Public Library and elected the organization's first directors: Harvey Hurd (president), John W. Thompson, J. Seymour Currey (secretary), Walter Lee Brown (treasurer), William A. Phillips (vice president), Frank R. Grover, and Emma Winner Rogers. They set membership dues at \$1 annually, or \$25 for life members. Their stated object was:

To collect and preserve the materials and history concerning  
the city of Evanston and vicinity, and to disseminate historical information.

It was Frank Grover who had started the discussion about the need for a historical society with a letter to the editor of the *Evanston Index* published in May 1897. He shared his concern that the community's history was on the verge of being lost. He told of rescuing an 1850s record book that documented the earliest years of Ridgeville Township (the original name of Evanston township) from a "heap of rubbish." He could envision everything else that was not being rescued. (This record book was the first "accession" to the EHS collection, given at the founding meeting of the organization, and it is on display in our "Milestones and Memories" exhibit on the 2nd floor of the Dawes House.)

Several things happened later that year and the next, that made the need for a community history organization surface in a more urgent way. Both Orrington Lunt and John Evans died in 1897. Lunt and Evans were founders of Northwestern University and were very influential in creating the community that was established to support and enhance it. John Foster and Ozro Crain had also died, and these men were true "old settlers" as they had been residents of the township long before Northwestern and Evanston were even dreamed of. In fact, it was John Foster who sold 360 acres to Northwestern to mark the beginning of the change from Ridgeville to Evanston.

Then, in February 1898, Frances Willard died suddenly. Though most well known for her work running the Woman's Christian Temperance Union, the largest organization of women in the world at the time, Willard had played the unusual role of also being Evanston's first historian. Willard wrote *A Classic Town: The Story of Evanston* in 1892. She had come to Evanston in 1858 with her family when the community was just getting started, making her among the founding settlers. She was a wealth of information about the early years, and she still knew many of the early residents and could draw on their recollections for her source material.

In 1900, the new organization held its first two history talks: in May there was a talk about the route of Green Bay Road, and in October a talk about "Early Drainage." EHS leaders also started almost immediately to point out the need for safe storage for its growing artifact and record collection - and to promote the idea of a new library building that would provide this. J. Seymour Currey, as the organization's secretary, was one of the most vocal advocates. Currey also served as record keeper and curator, and was well aware of the need, as many items of the

original collection were housed in his home due to the lack of any other suitable storage. The library was not the only early partner of the organization. The Northwestern University Natural History Museum (no longer existing) was also connected and was the primary repository for Indian artifacts found in the community.

In January of 1901, the organization held its first annual meeting, and shared news of its first year. The collection had grown steadily, and its talks had proven popular. There was hope that the collection would be useful to residents, students, and teachers of local history, who might find even the “annals of a quiet neighborhood” like Evanston of interest, fostering “local pride and public spirit.” (Evanston Index, 1.20.1900) In 1901, EHS started publishing booklets about Evanston history, based on the talks that were given. Frank Grover was the first author of these booklets with *Our Indian Predecessors: The First Evanstonians*.

In 1902, the organization printed what became a very popular calendar with images of old sites and log cabins from the area. Much of this time period was devoted to lobbying for the new library building. This dream came true in 1908 when the new library opened and EHS moved into the basement on its 10th anniversary. Lecture space in Library Hall made the library a perfect home for EHS.

In 1912, the Illinois State Historical Society met in Evanston for its annual meeting. A reception was held at the home of Charles Gates Dawes, an early supporter of EHS. Publications and lectures continued, while the organization continued to add to its collection.

During WWI the organization was quiet, but in 1918 when EHS celebrated its 20th anniversary, a call for the organization to have its own building was issued. The organization was starting to outgrow its basement quarters in the library and wanted to host public programs outside library hours. Stereopticon talks, or “illustrated lectures,” were very popular in these years. In 1921, annual dues were increased to \$2.

In 1928, on EHS’ 30th anniversary, the community celebrated with a banquet at the Northshore Hotel where Vice President Dawes spoke in favor of a new “community center” as EHS’ permanent home. Of course, many years later Dawes himself would grant this wish by donating his own home to serve as the organization’s headquarters.

Founded out of a concern to preserve the earliest history of the community, the Evanston Historical Society, now Evanston History Center, has evolved to carry a much broader focus. But its original mission to preserve, collect, and educate remains much the same today.