

Damon House museum sold

By **DAVE VOGEL**



The photo above, from October 1951, shows visitors to a special event at the museum, operated more than 75 years by the Milwaukee County Historical Society.

Lowell Damon's small house on Wauwatosa Avenue was pitifully lonely and ready for the wrecking ball when it was rescued about 75 years ago and turned into a period museum.

Then as today, motorists driving past scarcely gave a second glance to the Damon House, the oldest building in town. Barely seen and rarely visited, the mostly shuttered relic of a bygone day has been scraping by for decades. Now, its sleepy life as a museum has come to an end.

The Damon House has reverted to private ownership. Its future is undetermined.

William and Jennifer Hoag purchased the house in November from the Milwaukee County Historical Society. The Hoags, who live nearby on Church Street, said they are conferring with city planners and weighing options for new uses.

Whatever the Hoags do will be guided by a permanent preservation easement that requires approval for any alterations to the exterior and significant interior spaces.

Earlier, the Wauwatosa Historical Society, city officials, and a namesake neighborhood association, Lowell Damon Woods, were approached about taking over the property and declined, said Mame Croze McCully, the Milwaukee County

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Murder at the mansion evenings return

Infamous television host Jack Makison has agreed to make an appearance at a fundraiser for the Wauwatosa Historical Society. The question is: Why?

His show, *Pounce*, had a strong six-year run back in the '80s and made him a rich man. He was also deeply disliked for being the creative genius and face of *Pounce*, a mean-spirited show built on embarrassing practical jokes.

When the public fascination with his dark humor died out, Makison took his millions and disappeared into his Los Angeles mansion, rarely if ever to be seen again.

Why he accepted WHS Board President Grant Piasowski's request to come to the Kneeland-Walker House for this event is a mystery to end all mysteries. Or is it just the beginning?

Join the antics of Hysterical Society Players as they perform *Pounced*, by Wauwatosa playwright Peggy Devitt Katz, at 7 p.m. on Fridays, Feb. 21 and 28 and Saturdays, Feb. 22 and 29.

Tickets are \$50 (\$45 for WHS members), which includes comedy, suspense, food, beer, wine and, of course, murder and mayhem. They can be purchased online or in person at the Wauwatosa Historical Society's offices in the Kneeland-Walker house. Warning: Space is limited and tickets sell out quickly!



Our always-popular Hysterical Society Players are back this February for a new mystery written especially for the Wauwatosa Historical Society.

The Wauwatosa Historical Society (WHS) collects, preserves and disseminates Wauwatosa history.

Founded in 1977, the society is a donor-supported non-profit organization with more than 600 individual, family and business members.

WHS is an affiliate of the Wisconsin Historical Society and is supported by individual gifts, membership fees, and foundation grants.

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Historic Wauwatosa [ISSN0195-2951], published four times a year, is a WHS membership benefit. Full membership levels start at \$20 for seniors, \$25 for individuals, \$30 for families, \$40 for organizations and \$55 for businesses.

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FESTIVE 2019 WAS A VERY BUSY YEAR

WHS took a break last fall from its long-running series of annual home tours, but found great success with one new event and gratifying results from an invitation to tour the Kneeland-Walker House, beautifully decorated for the holidays.

The society's first Prosit Tosa, was held Sept. 28 on the grounds of the Kneeland-Walker House. This family friendly fundraiser drew applause-worthy crowds (over 500), offered Oktoberfest music, two amazing bands that would rival any heard in Bavaria, and brought in nice fundraising dollars that a repeat next fall is certain.

Stock House Brewing Co., 7208 W. North Ave., had a special keg just-for-us. Also featured were custom steins & wine glasses, a home-brew competition, a kids activity area, a special history exhibit that focused on Wauwatosa's early German population, German food sold by Kegel's Inn and a masskrugstammen competition. (If you're struggling with the pronunciation, just remember it as a stein-holding strength contest. With an arm parallel to the ground, competitors hold out a full one-liter beer stein for as long as they can. The last man or woman holding with good form is the winner.)

Special thanks to sponsors Landcrafters Inc.; Beth Jaworski of Shorewest Realtors; Shorewest Realtors - Elmbrook/Wauwatosa; and Bunzel's Meats and Catering.

The annual Christmas open house at the Kneeland-Walker House was as beautiful as ever, thanks to volunteer decorators led by Tracy Wey and Mary Kogler.

The number of visitors this year was like nothing seen before, thanks to new promotional efforts. Volunteer docents counted 247 guests on the Saturday of the open house weekend and another 242 on the Sunday. That's about 10 times the number of visitors in some previous years.

While admission to the open



Musicians Emily Roy and Kelly Weber, students at Whitman Middle School, were among the performers during the annual Christmas reception at the Kneeland-Walker House.

house is free, visitors this year were generous as well as numerous. Donation boxes were stuffed with hundreds of dollars.

As for resumption of the home tour, stay tuned.

WATCH YOUR E-MAIL FOR LATEST WHS NEWS

WHS is saving a heck of a lot of money on postage now that so many members have agreed to switch to delivery of *Historic Wauwatosa* by e-mail. About a quarter of the members still get a printed copy by mail.

Reducing expenses helps us focus on education and preservation missions, so the newsletter switch is much appreciated. Also in the interest of reducing expenses, *Historic Wauwatosa* now is published quarterly rather than six times a year.

But we don't want anyone to miss out on any WHS meetings or events, so look for periodic e-mail blasts with timely details and invitations.

MARK YOUR CALENDAR FOR SPEAKER SERIES

Count on variety in this year's speaker series. All take place at 7 p.m. on Tuesdays, but the sites vary. Here's the schedule, ar-

ranged by volunteer Jeff Randall:

MARCH 10: Phil Sklar of the new National Bobblehead Hall of Fame and Museum in Milwaukee will talk about dozens of exhibits featuring what's billed as the world's largest collection of bobbleheads. Meeting is at the Kneeland-Walker House.

MAY 12: The Wauwatosa Woman's Club celebrates its 125th anniversary this year, and WHS members will learn about the club's interplay with Wauwatosa history, as well as its own efforts to preserve local history. This event is at the Woman's Club, 1626 Wauwatosa Ave. Kay Tierney and Deb Dubinski will speak.

SEPT. 8: Dennis McBride remembers the crucial 1960 presidential primary in Wisconsin and tells of his childhood encounters with the campaigns. Meeting is at the Kneeland-Walker House.

GIFTS

WHS recognizes the following gifts:
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MUSEUM, from page 1

Historical Society's executive director.

"We believe this is the best preservation outcome for the building," she said. "I'm excited to see what the future holds for this house."

The county historical society's board of directors had been mulling the museum's future for more than five years while continually spending thousands of dollars a year on maintenance. For at least the past 30 years, the museum limped along with just enough money for emergency repairs, Croze McCully she said. Critical maintenance was deferred, which worked against aims of preservation.

"It's a sad thing, but it was financially unsustainable and we just couldn't keep it up," she said. "In effect, it was demolition by neglect."

Alissa Weber, Wauwatosa Historical Society executive director, said she and members of her board inspected the house after Croze McCully approached them last fall. They were overwhelmed by the scale of repairs needed.

"It's frustrating because we've got our hands full with our own education mission as well as costly preservation of our headquarters in the historic Kneeland-Walker House," Weber said. "But the most important thing is that the Damon House will be preserved."

Since the house opened as a museum, thousands of school children have toured it on Wednesday field trips. In recent years, the museum hosted only a couple hundred visitors a year, with a mere trickle on Sunday afternoons. Lack of restrooms and safety concerns have proved to be insurmountable obstacles to bringing in more visitors.

Most artifacts in the house, probably 90%, were unrelated to Wauwatosa. They now are stored by the county historical society and are available for special exhibits. The house has architectural features considered uncommon in Wisconsin, but mainly is recognized because it managed to survive long enough to become the oldest building in town.

Lowell Damon built the more elaborate four-room front of the house after moving to Wauwatosa in 1846. His father, Oliver Damon Jr., moved to Wauwatosa two years earlier and built the back of the house. That part has been the caretaker living quarters in recent years.

The Damons weren't big names in local history. Oliver supervised the county poor farm. Lowell was a wheelwright and furniture maker who served as clerk for the old Town of Wauwatosa for 24 years and as a county supervisor for a couple

years. Oliver Damon came to Wauwatosa from Fitzwilliam, New Hampshire in 1844. He used wood from the nearby forest to build the original part of the house.

Lowell Damon died in 1878. His widow, Amy, died in 1931. They are buried at Forest Home Cemetery and have no living descendants.

A 1935 Historic American Buildings Survey by the National Park Service described the construction: "Some of the young saplings were simply squared on one side and used as rafters and joists. Others were hewn and squared with an adze, and the tool marks are still to be seen on many a piece of timber in the old house. Much of this timbering is of oak and black walnut "With Oliver were his son-in-law, Jonathan Warren and other family. By 1846, Oliver and/or his son Lowell had added the stylish 1.5-story front section. The broad front and one-room depth are unusual for Wisconsin — perhaps a form

the Damons knew from New England. The shape of the building could be considered Colonial style, along with the front door with its symmetry and side-lights. Greek Revival style could provide the pilasters on the front corners, the cornice returns, and the frieze boards. The diamondpaned frieze windows on the side walls are an uncommon touch."

By 1935, the survey found that the house had fallen into disrepair and had "outlived its usefulness as a human habitation. It is almost ready for the hand of the wreck-er."

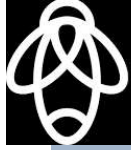
Instead, the nostalgic sons of a previous owner, Alexander Rogers, bought their childhood home and donated it to the county historical society for use as a museum. It was the county historical society's first property. Today, the society operates the Kilbourntown House museum at Estabrook Park in Shorewood, the Jeremiah Curtin Museum and Trimborn Farms, both in Greendale, and the society's headquarters in an old bank building in downtown Milwaukee.

Over the years, gardens surrounding the Damon House were maintained by local garden clubs. Most of those clubs folded in the 1970s, and volunteers with the Master Gardeners of Southeastern Wisconsin have handled the gardening in recent years.

The Damon House was one of more than 15,000 house museums in the nation, according to the National Trust for Historic Preservation. Many are small and obscure. Many also are struggling to stay open. Wauwatosans who organized in the 1960s and '70s to raise money for the museum called themselves "Friends of Lowell Damon," or FOLD. They probably wouldn't be pleased to see the museum fold, but would at least be satisfied that this piece of Wauwatosa's past has a future.



Women attend a tea party in June 1956 on the patio of the Lowell Damon House Museum. It was built in two stages, beginning in 1846, and is the oldest surviving building in Wauwatosa.



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FROM OUR COLLECTIONS

Up to 20 mph, this Jewell was a gem



Roy and Tillie Watner photographed about 1906 in what was believed to be the third automobile to hit the roads in Wauwatosa.

Roy and Tillie Watner of Wauwatosa drove a Jewell automobile, one of the first to be manufactured and believed to be the third car to appear on local roads. This photo of the Watners in their car is dated “about 1906.” The Watners said that with a single-cylinder, eight-horsepower engine, their car ran great up to 20 to 25 mph. Above that speed, the car tended to break down.

About 1,000 Jewells were made in Ohio between 1906 and 1909. A basic version of this car sold for about \$400. Pneumatic tires, a top and side curtains cost extra.

This photograph is one of hundreds added in 2018 to the historical society’s collections from Ed Wilkomen, a lifetime WHS member who died in 2017. Wilkomen maintained something of a personal historical society within his home, and that collection is among those most frequently tapped in fielding research inquiries, said Carol Bannen, volunteer leader of the Judith A. Simonsen Research Library.

Photos from the collection are being scanned with new equipment purchased recently with a grant to the society. Digital copies of the photos are available for purchase. Contact the WHS office for details.