



Preston
Historical
Society

Newsletter

Christmas Tree Dedication: Bob Maust

By: Alison Leathers

On Saturday, December 13, 2025, the Preston Area Chamber of Commerce held its annual Christmas tree dedication at the historic outdoor campus.



The Chamber took nominations on who to dedicate the tree to, and this year the tree was dedicated to Bob Maust, who passed away in 2025. Bob grew up in Preston and graduated from Preston High School. He was active in the community, serving on the school board, Root River Power Association Board, and the Preston Historical Society. He started the annual Preston Historical Society Tractor Ride and was integral in getting our historic cabooses and box cars to Preston. He also served at Preston United Methodist Church and on the Preston City Council and the Preston Economic Development Authority. Bob's impact to our community and the Preston Historical Society will have a lasting ripple effect.



Photos on this page by Jon DeVries.

New Board Officers

2026 Board Officers

President: Sheila Craig

Vice President: Barb Mielke

Secretary: Diane Johnson

Treasurer: Matt Quanrud

2026 Committee Chairs

Collections: Joanne Hall

Publicity: Alison Leathers

Finance - Barb Mielke

Membership - Linda Wolfe

Facilities - Jon DeVries



New Email Addresses

PHS now has new email addresses for its officers and other positions, and uses a new domain name.

- President:
phs-president@prestonmnhistory.com
- Vice President:
phs-vicepresident@prestonmnhistory.com
- Secretary:
phs-secretary@prestonmnhistory.com
- Treasurer:
phs-treasurer@prestonmnhistory.com
- Collections:
phs-collections@prestonmnhistory.com
- Marketing:
phs-marketing@prestonmnhistory.com
- General:
prestonhistoricalsociety@prestonmnhistory.com

President's Notes

By: Sheila Craig

2025 was an incredible year for the Preston Historical Society! Many words besides "incredible" could be used – 'awesome', 'amazing', 'unbelievable', 'unprecedented'! It took a "team" of over 40 different members, with everyone taking on a small piece of the puzzle to pull together the new Depot Museum and Riverfront Center. A year ago, after just 6 months of fundraising we had acquired the \$400,000 needed to begin construction. And THEN by October 4, 2025, we were able to hold a Soft Opening attended by more than 225 people. It has been more than just an 'incredible' year.

The Riverfront Center rentals began in December. Three uses of the space have taken place. And now much work is still needed to achieve our goals of having a Grand Opening by Trout Days weekend complete with some new displays. The outdoor area around the building needs a design and landscaping to display some of our outdoor artifacts. Plans to open the museum area are being made for this summer. If you are interested in being a volunteer, please contact us. Projects will still take many hands to make them happen. THANK you to ALL of the volunteers who have worked on the Depot Museum and Riverfront Center to make this beautiful building a fantastic gateway to the City of Preston.



Display in the DMRC. Photo by Steve Hall.

2026 Events Calendar

By: Sheila Craig

- Grand Opening - Trout Days weekend in May; specific time TBD
- Raffle - opens in May with drawing on August 6 at the PHS Monthly meeting
- Tractor Ride - September 19 & 20
- Monthly meetings - the first Thursday of each month

Nov. 2025 Newsletter Correction

Tractor Ride Report Edit: We would like to recognize that Thrivent was a \$250 donor. We used the money for food, and we omitted this in the Nov. 2025 newsletter.



Original Preston Depot sign. Photo by Alison Leathers.

DMRC Room Naming

By Alison Leathers

Our Fundraising Committee (Alison Leathers (Chair), Sheila Craig, Jon DeVries, Steve Hall, and Barb Mielke) has been meeting the last few months to finalize the naming rights of five areas on the historic campus and in the Depot Museum and Riverfront Center (DMRC). This mission was in accordance with our 2024 Fundraising Campaign to reach our \$400,000 goal. This campaign advertised (through our brochures, social media, and website) the top donors would get naming rights to the rooms in the DMRC.

Stay tuned to see the new signage coming up soon!

Marketing Committee Updates

By: Alison Leathers

In Fall of 2025, a marketing committee was formed to investigate many marketing needs for the Preston Historical Society. The committee consists of Ann Sparks, Sheila Craig, Alison Leathers, Ilene Edwards, Debbie Thompson, and Gabby Kinneberg. The items the committee are working on:

- New PHS logo
- New marketing plan
- New brand guide (font, colors, etc.)
- Website updates
- Design of printed material (brochures, etc.)
- Design of promotional items, like new t-shirts
- Assist with the design of the signage for the naming of the rooms in the DMRC.

At the January 8 board and membership meeting, a vote was approved to adopt the logo presented by the Marketing Committee. The Committee continues to work with Kelly Printing to finalize the logo.



DMRC portico. Customizable bricks are still for sale! Photo by Steve Hall.



DMRC Riverfront Center. Photo by Steve Hall.

Riverfront Center: The Perfect Venue for your Next Event

By: Sheila Craig

Are you looking for a space for your next meeting? Or maybe for a bridal or baby shower? How about a cozy room to get-together with friends to do some serious quilting or crocheting? We have the place for you – the Riverfront Center!

Email phs-president@prestonmnhistory.com

We will send you an application form that includes the cost of the rental and other rules and regulations. This can be filled out online or on paper. A committee will review your application, and if approved you will be sent an email on how to proceed.

We do allow liquor on the premises through our Consumption and Display permit for the use of liquor by your group. If your event wishes to sell liquor, you will need to hire a third party who has an off-site liquor license.

Come enjoy our bright open space that can be arranged by you as you need – 70 chairs, 10 tables, a kitchenette counter, refrigerator and microwave.

Membership Update

No new updates to report.

As always, remember our membership form is available on our website. Encourage others to join us!



Photo donated by Jeff and Janet Woellert.
Photo by Steve Hall.

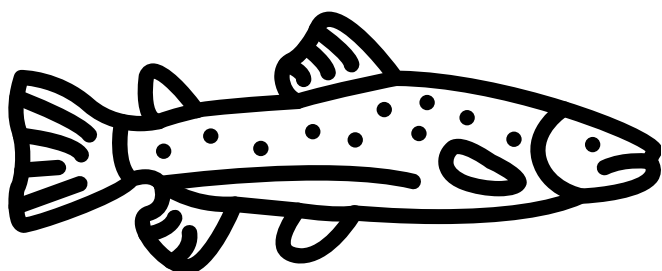
Collections Committee Highlights

By: Joanne Hall

Last January the Collection Committee was packing and arranging storage for objects large and small in order to vacate the former Dairy and Farm Building. This January we are working with our collection in our new completed Depot Museum space! The past few months we have been accessioning, tagging and storing recent donations. The process of settling into our new location results in frequent questions like “do we have tape? Where are the paper clips? Where is the stapler? Where did this come from?!”

We held a Donation Intake Day at the Depot on Oct. 22 from 9am-6:30pm. Donations were received that day from: Cindy Mensink, Eileen Linden, Randy Gartner, Jeff & Janet Woellert, Dan Miller, Rick & Sue Grooters, Lynn Benson, and Geraldine Williams. Other donations had been received from: Kevin Ostern, Mary Ellen Derby, Phil Durst, Mary Jane Glaser, Julie Murray, and Vesterheim Museum. Jeff and Janet Woellert donated a 1972 aerial photo of Preston. John Carlin and Jonathan Wood framed and hung the photo in the Riverfront Center. A vintage aluminum tree donated by Charles and Ann Sparks added some holiday sparkle to the Riverfront Center. A donation of several Ebert Hardware papers and artifacts, including a wooden hand cart, were received from Jeff Bennett. We appreciate those who are working with us to preserve Preston history.

We are planning Trout Day themed displays for the Depot opening Trout Days weekend. We plan to vary displays to offer a new experience with each visit to the Depot!



**History Lives
Here!**

Forestville State Trail Effort Renamed Forestville State Trail & River Ecology Committee

By: Jon B. DeVries

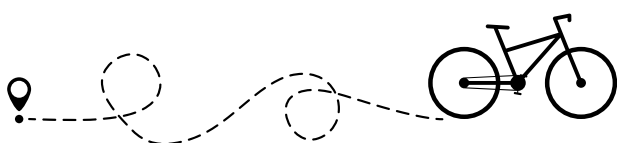
With the continuing support of the Empowering Small Minnesota Communities (ESMC) program of the University of Minnesota, the PHS committee met on January 22nd (via ZOOM due to weather) to discuss further plans for completion of the state trail to Historic Forestville and Forestville State Park. The committee has broadened its title and purpose to encompass the ecological, environmental, and recreational benefits the trail would bring to the Root River, the river valley and adjoining properties.

Representatives from the three committee communities – Preston, Lanesboro, & Harmony – attended including Harmony Mayor Steve Dunney and Lanesboro Mayor Alicia Pearson. Andi Sutton, RSDP/ESMC and Sheila Craig, PHS President welcomed the committee.

The meeting discussion highlights were as follows:

- GIS mapping of trail route area and options with Dan Handeen, Minnesota Design Center, University of Minnesota – demonstration of map layers and tools.
- Update from Lanesboro on MNTU funding for riverfront master plan – public hearings complete and state planning started - \$750,000 state funding.
- Update from Harmony on Niagara Cave/Iowa border state trail extension – trail paving complete to cave and the state line, shoulder enhancements underway.
- River ecosystem enhancement added to committee goals and title.

Next Meeting: February – DATE TBD.



Forestville State Trail Effort Continued...

Kent Skaar, Senior Project Manager, Parks & Trails, MN DNR

- ADA engineering work update for Preston to Township trail segment
- Engineering route opportunities for Township to Forestville segment

Dan Handeen, School of Architecture & Research Fellow, Center for Sustainable Building Research, University of Minnesota

- Highlighting trail options identified in community discussions and GIS analysis.

Ecological Environmental Opportunities – Joel Mielke & Mel Haynor: <https://tinyurl.com/46h48a2d>

History Moment - Waukokee

By: Carol Soland. abridged by Alison Leathers

District No. 73 - the Waukokee School

In 1854, a log schoolhouse was rolled in to form a 16x20 foot schoolhouse that had 20 scholars. In 1855, the school was constructed to be 20x30 feet and contained a bell weighing 75 pounds. Fred Cummings' memoirs say they formed school district #73 in 1856 and each land owner was assessed two house logs to be hauled to the proposed school site. An old-fashioned sawmill on the William Miller farm furnished lumber for the roof. Miss Jerusha (Jessie) Thacher was the first teacher, and she taught three successive summer terms at Waukokee. Many other teachers followed and introduced different subjects.

In 1867, the old log schoolhouse was replaced by a new stone structure at the cost of \$1300.00. It is located in section 25 of Fillmore County, five miles south of Preston on Co. Rd. 22. The school closed in 1894 against the wishes of the church people. The children then had to go to Forestville School. Another stone or clay brick school was built in 1900.

History Moment - Waukokee contd.

The Waukokee Cemetery

In 1856, the cemetery was surveyed on land presented for the purpose by Mrs. Sylvester Benson and Mrs. William D. Hurlburt in section 24, and it contains 1.25 acres. In 1872, the citizens fenced the ground and today there are approximately 80 graves. Many stones are dated for deaths that occurred in the 1850s and 1860s.

Waukokee Village

This was a locality rather than a village as it was never plotted or recorded. It is located in section 25 in Willow Creek Valley, and the Waukokee name was derived from a Ojibwe-Chippewa Tribe American Indian chief, who used to have a fishing and hunting camp at this place. The St. Paul-Dubuque Stage Coach trail went through Waukokee. Milton West built the first house in 1853 and opened a small grocery store. In 1857, there were seven houses in the village and a post office was established until it was discontinued in 1868. Church services were held in the school house, and various ministers traveled in several counties to provide services. In 1856, Rev. Dyer reported that there were 100 members, which represented 1/12 of the entire membership of Minnesota. When the school closed, it was expected that families pay \$5 each to build a 34x32 foot church.

In 1871, a "Vigilance Association" was formed to work together against horse thieves. A group worked to help farmers lobby to the state and national legislature to control unfair shipping rates and other businesses that harmed small farms.

History Moment - Mr. Austin W. Farnsworth

By: Ashley Wood

While looking for Preston History, Ashley Wood came across a book called 'Old Rail Fence Corners' by Lucy Leavenworth Wilder Morris, published in 1914. The book's intention was to find and document old roads, pioneer, and Indian trails in the state that had been lost to history. The book relied on the stories and memories of some of Minnesota's earliest settlers, telling us how they came to the state. The book ended up becoming quite the collection of oral histories from early Minnesota.

Mr. Austin W. Farnsworth submitted his story for this book, recalling his early days in Fillmore County. Austin was born in Vermont in 1843 to Isaac and Deborah Farnsworth. He writes that his father came to Fillmore County the year before the rest of the family to plant two acres of wheat, two acres of corn, and half an acre of potatoes, that later rotted in the ground. Then in 1851 Austin and the family arrived at McGregor Landing in Iowa where a neighbor with an ox team and prairie schooner picked them up to bring them back to Fillmore County. Austin writes "We were strapped. Not one cent was left after the expenses of the trip were paid." Giving us some insight as to what new settlers in the area were going through. They settled in the Waukokee area which had the nearest post office.

History Moment - Mr. Austin W. Farnsworth contd.

Austin says he was nine years old when he and his brother built all the furniture for their cabin out of "popple", and how they used pegs to join it, not using any nails. He tells us of their mattress filled with wild hay, and the stones they used for a cook stove. His mother would nearly go blind from the smoke filling the cabin, and she would make coffee from corn meal crusts that he said "would skin a possum three ways for Sunday". They would go up to Carimona to get cracked wheat from the grist mill. He also mentions the wild red plums, berries and crab apples in the area.

Austin also included some thrilling and endearing stories about growing up in the Waukokee area. Ones like the time he was eight years old and killed a buffalo in Buffalo Grove. He says at one time he counted 75 deer and seven elk. He tells the story of his pet rattlesnake that he got from a den of rattlesnakes near their house. In one day they reportedly killed 78 of them. Another story he tells involves his sister being treed by a pack of Timberwolves. Austin's story gives us such an appreciation for what the early settlers saw in the area and why people chose to live here, as well as the everyday hardships people faced in 1800s.

Austin Farnsworth would move to the Concord and Mantorville area of Dodge County a few years after his father Isaac died in 1857. Isaac is buried in the Waukokee Cemetery. Austin eventually moved to Minneapolis where he worked as a Hard Wood Finisher and later had a long career as a handyman for City Hall. He died in 1918. His obituary tells us that he enlisted with the Fifth Minnesota Infantry (Civil War) in Fillmore County and served for almost four years. He was injured in the Battle of Mobile.

Volunteer Opportunities

We need you! Preston Historical Society relies on volunteers to make our organization run! If you have time and talent to share, reach out to an officer listed below. You can help us by:

- Help sell raffle tickets.
- Spread the word! Tell others about membership opportunities, brick campaign for our portico, and more!
- Tactor ride event help in September.
- Grand opening event help in May.
- Serve on the board or a committee.
- Or - tell us about a talent you want to share, and we will find you an opportunity!

Preston Historical Society Officers & Contact Information

- President: Sheila Craig (507.273.1481), phs-president@prestonmnhistory.com
- Vice President: Barb Mielke, phs-vicepresident@prestonmnhistory.com
- Secretary: Diane Johnson, phs-secretary@prestonmnhistory.com
- Treasurer: Matt Quanrud, phs-treasurer@prestonmnhistory.com
- Newsletter Editor: Alison Leathers, phs-marketing@prestonmnhistory.com
- Social Media: Ilene Edwards, ilene6006@gmail.com

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