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Ripon’s schoolhouse worth a side trip

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RIPON – The focus in the summer of 2024 will be on Milwaukee and Chicago, and the I-94 freeway between them that will become the Convention Corridor.

Anybody interested in political history, however, should take a side trip 70 miles northwest of Milwaukee to Ripon. In Ripon you can find the Little White Schoolhouse, where the first discussion was held that led to the formation of the Republican Party.

Some folks from Jackson, Mich., will argue that the first state convention of the party was held there. And, the first national GOP convention was said to be held at a meeting hall in Pittsburgh, Pa.

Others from New Hampshire and Iowa claimed that they had groups that met before those in Ripon.

But it is well documented that on March 1, 1854 a group of folks from various political groups gathered at a church in Ripon. Most of these people were ardent anti-slavery supporters already.

Their feelings were further stoked a few days later because of the Joshua Glover arrest on March 10, 1854. Glover, an escaped slave, was arrested in Racine and jailed in Milwaukee. A newspaper man, Sherman Booth, led a rebellion against the arrest and a group actually rescued Glover from jail.

Perhaps the strongest statement that came out of the first meeting was the following: “Resolved, that all the outrages hitherto perpetuated or attempted upon the North and freedom by the slave leaders and their natural allies, not one compares in bold and impudent audacity, treachery and meanness with this, the Nebraska bill.”

The bill mentioned was the Kansas-Nebraska bill, introduced by Illinois Democratic Sen. Stephen Douglas in 1854 that supported “popular sovereignty,” allowing settlers in the new territories of Kansas and Nebraska to choose whether slavery would exist. This did not sit well with those who attended that first meeting at the Ripon schoolhouse, since most were anti-slavery and did not want to see it spread beyond the Southern states.

A.E. Bovay, an attorney and early land developer of Ripon, was a leader of the local group and had ties both in Wisconsin and back in New York state. He lobbied newspaper mogul Horace Greeley to support a new political party. Greeley was resistant at first.

That did not stop Bovay and his associates. They organized a second meeting but did not want to hold it at a church again, because of their belief in the separation of church and state. The schoolhouse, built in 1853, became the venue.

See photos from author Gregg Hoffmann below. Story continues below the gallery.

A second meeting was held at the schoolhouse on March 20, 1854. Fifty-three men, three women and one child reportedly attended, according to some sources. The local committees of the Whigs and Free Soil Parties were dissolved. Five men, led by Bovay, were chosen as the committee of the new party. The name Republican was formally adopted as the name of the party.

Bovay wrote Greeley, “We went into the little meeting held in a schoolhouse Whigs, Free Soilers and Democrats. We came out of it Republicans and we were the first Republicans in the Union.”

Greeley eventually came around and used his newspapers to report on the new party’s activities.

Ripon folks stayed active in the Republican Party and politics in general. Booth, the newspaperman who had played such a big role in Glover’s escape, found himself in and out of jail for that case and for other rebellious acts.

In 1860, he escaped jail with the aid of supporters, some reportedly from Ripon. Three days later, he was making a public speech in Ripon, where a friendly crowd prevented his rearrest by a deputy marshal. Other attempts to jail him were thwarted before his capture on Oct. 8, when he was brought back to prison before

cheering crowds. President James Buchanan eventually freed Booth not by pardoning him but by remitting his fines, on request of federal Judge Andrew G. Miller.

Historians might differ on details of Ripon's role in further development of the Republican Party and U.S. politics in general, but the role of the schoolhouse is acknowledged by most, if not all, of those who have studied its history.

The schoolhouse looks like many one-room schools you might have toured. It has been restored as closely as possible to how it might have appeared on that historic night in 1854. One difference is that it has well-written plaques that explain the history of the anti-slavery feelings and other details of history of the building and movement founded there.

It should be noted that the building does not sit on the same site where it was in 1854. In fact, it's been moved a half dozen times to different spots in Ripon, including Ripon College more than once. For a while, it was owned by George Peck, once governor of Wisconsin and creator of the Peck's Bad Boy stories, which was told in his newspapers and other places.

The latest move of the schoolhouse occurred just earlier this year and with some controversy. Some opposed the move from a site closer to downtown Ripon to the west side of the town along Fond Du Lac Avenue. Some said the move could threaten the building's status as a National Historic Landmark. Still others said the Ripon Chamber of Commerce which owns the building. and the Ripon Historical Society, were "selling out" to attract tourists from the national conventions.

Steve Arbaugh, who serves with both those organizations and does support the move, said he understands resistance because the building was at its previous site for decades. He said that the previous site felt pressures from potential expansion of downtown development.

While he admitted that the new site is primarily in a business section of Ripon, he said Fond du Lac Avenue offered much easier access and exposure for the schoolhouse. That will be the case not only for any tourism that develops from the conventions, but for years. The site also includes a former bank that has been donated and will be developed into a center that includes info about the schoolhouse and other historic features of Ripon.

Arbaugh said divisions over the move seemed to have eased.

In some ways it seems appropriate for the move of a place where a political party was founded to include some controversy. Certainly, the Republicans started amidst controversy and when Abraham Lincoln won the presidency after switching to the party the country went into the Civil War.

Of course, we are in a divided political time in the present day. But that is another thing you can learn from touring the schoolhouse. Parties change and evolve over time. Today's Democrats and Independents might be surprised to find how much they agreed with those early Republicans on several issues.

The idea of the development of a center on the acreage around the schoolhouse also makes a good point. The schoolhouse, by no means, is the only attraction in Ripon. Prime might be Ripon College. Founded in 1851, its first class of students did not enroll until 1853. It was first known as Brockway College, named for William S. Brockway, who gave the most, $25, in a fundraising effort.

Ripon's first class, four women, graduated in 1867. The college was founded with ties to local churches, but early in its history the institution became secular. The National Forensic League was founded at the college in 1925. Since that time communication has been an important subject at the college.

The college maintains an enrollment of 800 to 1,000 during a time when many small liberal arts colleges have struggled. It offers 31 majors and is even building a new football stadium. The campus has many well-maintained historic buildings that would be the envy of many larger colleges.

It does not ignore the political history of its location. The Center for Politics and the People was established at the college in spring 2014. The center sponsors scholarships and hosts special events featuring elected officials and policy makers, high-level campaign operatives, academic experts, journalists, and citizens representing a spectrum of political views. The center also manages the college's annual Career Discovery Tour to Washington, D.C., and helps place students in internships.

You will see Ripon mentioned at times concerning broader historic and political terms. The Ripon Society is a public policy organization that was founded in 1962. It is located in Washington D.C. and not affiliated with the college. It does take its

name from the town. One of the main goals of The Ripon Society is to promote GOP "ideas and principles that keep the nation secure, taxes low and having a federal government that is smaller, smarter and more accountable to the people." It calls its approach center-right and specifically mentions the values of Lincoln and Teddy Roosevelt.

First called Prairie City, Ripon was known for its Signal Oak that served as a landmark along the edge of the prairie for Native Americans and pioneers. The earlier settlers were northerners, primarily from New York and New England. The Wisconsin Phalanx established a Ceresco communal community settlement in the area. Others with varied backgrounds followed. The Ripon Historical Society covers much of the local history.

Ripon has a historic downtown with many amenities and a surrounding area that includes Green Lake and several other tourism attractions.

You can find out more about the Little White Schoolhouse here. The author also suggests the video "The Founding of the Republican Party at the Little White Schoolhouse" as an excellent source for a more detailed historical account. It is sold through the Schoolhouse.

Additional Ripon history can be found here.

Tourism info for Ripon

Ripon College