

Museum Notes

for the week of May 3 – 9, 2026

by Kristen Parrott, curator

Planning a research trip will be the topic of the next genealogy class. On Thursday, May 14, at 9AM, Rebecca Hopman from the Wisconsin Historical Society genealogy library in Madison will present a program about library resources called, “A Visit to WHS: Practical Tips for Planning Your Family History Research Trip”. Rebecca will appear via Zoom. Note the earlier than usual start time for this class. The genealogy class is going to the library in Madison on Thursday, June 11, so this will be a good introduction for that trip.

New students are always welcome to join the genealogy class. Vernon County Historical Society members attend for free, and non-members are asked to pay \$5 per class session. Classes are held in the first-floor, wheelchair-accessible conference room at the Vernon County History Center.

March is Women’s History Month, and a time when we like to highlight stories about Vernon County women, but we learn new stories throughout the year and don’t always want to wait for March. A good story that I’ve just come across is about Em Joseph of the Viola area.

I learned it from Ona Trappe Miller’s essay about growing up in Seeleyburg in the late 1800’s and early 1900’s. The essay includes a picturesque description of the stagecoach. The stage carried mail and occasionally a couple of passengers three times per week between Sparta and Seeleyburg, as Ona remembers it. She writes that, “The driver wore a wide large-brimmed hat, a long heavy coat, and leather boots, carrying a long leather whip and with a double-barreled shotgun on the seat”.

The stagecoach usually tore into Seeleyburg at a great rate, terrifying the children of the village. Little Ona assumed that the driver was a man, but when she discovered that the driver was actually a woman, she began to call her “the stage woman”. This driver was Em Joseph, wife of Aaron Joseph.

Aaron Joseph of Town of Forest, Richland County, and Sophia Emma Withrow of Town of Bloom, Richland County, were both born in the early 1860’s. They married in 1884, and had two sons a few years later.

From newspapers of the day, we see that in 1894, Aaron secured the contract for carrying the daily mail between Viola and Ontario. In 1897, he sold his stage route that ran from Viola to Rockton. And in 1899, he bought back the stage route between Viola and Richland Center, which he had owned previously. These brief mentions in the newspaper don’t fill in all the details, but we get the general idea that Mr. Joseph owned stagecoach lines that ran roughly between Ontario and Richland Center.

Only it wasn’t Mr. Joseph who was driving the stage. The newspaper doesn’t say so, but it was his wife, Sophia Emma who sometimes went by “Em”, who was driving that route, at least part of the time. Another essay (by an unknown author) detailing Seeleyburg-La Farge history also talks about “Mrs. Aaron Joseph who carried mail from Viola to Ontario”. This article focuses on the fact that in warm weather she didn’t wear a hat when she drove the stage and therefore got tanned, shocking the village women in their sunbonnets.

I enjoy these tales of historic people who were outside the mainstream, and hope that you do too!