

Museum Notes

for the week of November 2 – 8, 2025

by Kristen Parrott, curator

The Vernon County Museum and History Center is now on its winter hours of Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday, 11AM to 4PM, or by appointment. Staff is often here at other hours, so feel free to call us at 608-637-7396 to make an appointment.

The next meeting of the genealogy class will be Thursday, November 13, at 10AM, at the history center. This will be the annual “help each other” class, when students bring their research problems to share with others, in hopes that someone will have a solution. All of those family history buffs in one place will surely generate some ideas!

Everyone is welcome to attend the classes. Vernon County Historical Society members attend for free, and non-members are asked to pay \$5 per class. This will be the last class session for 2025. The class takes a break in December and January, and starts up again in February. Many thanks to the genealogy class teacher, Karen Sherry, who has ably led this group for about ten years now.

Just before Hallowe'en, a request from a researcher introduced me to a Vernon County story that I hadn't heard before. In November of 1874, 151 years ago, a man named John Downie (or Downey) was outside his home in the Town of Liberty when he was shot and left for dead by an unknown assailant. He was tended by his wife and his half-brother and local doctors, and slowly recovered.

About a week later, the half-brother, James Larry, was arrested for the crime. Neighbors threatened to lynch him, but he was safely escorted to the Vernon County jail in Viroqua. At a preliminary examination before a local judge, it became apparent that James Larry had been trying to persuade John Downie's wife to run away with him, and this was presumed to be his motive for the shooting.

While awaiting trial, James Larry was again threatened with lynching. Men wearing masks and carrying weapons broke open an outer door of the jail, but found the prisoner gone. The sheriff had learned of the plan to kill James Larry, and had removed him elsewhere.

The case went to trial in June of 1875, and Larry was acquitted. There was apparently no concrete evidence that he had shot his half-brother, John Downie, so the jury found him not guilty. For a final time, Larry was threatened with lynching by an angry mob that believed he *was* guilty, but an under-sheriff got him away in time, and Larry was reported to have caught a boat at Victory and gone north. What I find so strange about this story is that a man found innocent by a jury of his peers, was also found guilty and repeatedly threatened with death by an unofficial “jury” of other peers.

The only known lynching in Vernon County occurred a few years later, in 1888, when a young man named Andrew Grandstaff was accused of murdering Reuben and Matilda Drake and their two young grandchildren, Laura and Denver Dupee, in the Town of Kickapoo. Before he could be tried, Grandstaff was dragged from his jail cell and lynched on the lawn of the Vernon County courthouse. (Both the courthouse and the jail had been constructed in 1880, so they were not the same buildings where James Larry was held and tried a few years earlier.)

This is not a happy history, but maybe it tells us something important about our county's past, and about how we have changed for the better.