

Museum Notes

for the week of September 13 – 19, 2026
by Kristen Parrott, curator

As we continue to commemorate the U.S. 250th, this month we offer two programs that focus on the idea of the “American Experiment”. The first program is about the history of the state orphanage at Sparta, and the second is about the history of the Vernon County asylum and poor house/farm. These institutions were all experiments in caring for vulnerable populations: orphans, the very poor, the mentally ill, disabled people, the elderly.

On Tuesday, September 22, at 7PM, at the Vernon County Museum and History Center, Jarrod Roll will present a program titled, “Gone But Not Forgotten: History of the Wisconsin State School / Child Center”. Jarrod is the Director of the Monroe County Local History Room and Museum.

Between 1886 and 1976, Wisconsin children who were orphaned or neglected were often sent to the orphanage in Sparta, officially called the State Public School for Dependent and Neglected Children. Some of these children came from Vernon County. At the height of its operation in the 1930s, the State School, later renamed the “Wisconsin Child Center,” was home to over 500 children and occupied 25 buildings on its campus.

In the structured environment of the Child Center, children were provided with food, clothing, health care, education, and manual training, until they were 18 years old. The goal of the institution was to place children with families outside its walls. For some children, going to the Child Center was the first step to a better life, but for others, living there was another sad chapter in an already traumatic childhood.

Everyone is welcome to attend this fascinating program. Programs are held in the museum’s first-floor conference room. Suggested donation of \$2.50 per person.

A few days later, on Sunday, September 27, the Vernon County Historical Society will host a cemetery walk at the Vernon County Cemetery in Viroqua at 4PM. The cemetery is located just north of what was once the Vernon County asylum and poor house, near the Erlandson Building off County Home Rd. Most of the asylum and poor house/farm buildings were torn down several decades ago.

Residents who died at these institutions, and whose families were unable to retrieve their bodies, were buried here in this cemetery. The cemetery was also a “potter’s field” for the county, a place to bury those who had no money to pay for a grave.

The poor farm, also called the alms house, was established in Viroqua in the 1860’s, and the asylum, later called a hospital, was built in 1889. The last burials in the cemetery occurred around 1970. A large stone marker commemorates all who are buried there. Most of the individual gravestones have been removed, but 30 still remain in place.

This cemetery walk will focus on stories of people who lived or worked at the poor house and the asylum, and those who are buried there. Costumed actors will tell their stories. More details next week!