

Bethinking of Old Orleans

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NEW HISTORIC MARKER



In commemoration of the ninety-fifth anniversary of the opening of Swan Library, an historic marker has been erected. Shown before this typical blue and yellow casting, are L to R: Evelyn Lyman, Library Director; Dr. James Orr, President of the Library Board of Trustees and Rev. Jeff Haines, Vice President of the Board. The marker has been placed within inches of the south elevation of the building so as to be equally prominent from the front.

The Swan Library, being a part of the Historic Court House District, is on the National Register of Historic places. In the past few years, as County Historian, I have encouraged the procurement of these markers for various properties in the Historic Court House district. A sign at the Erie Canal dock in Albion points out the Court House Square as a place to which boaters can walk. With the addition of such historic markers, the area has become more meaningful not only to tourists but local people as well. We can expect to see another historic marker this season erected by the First United Methodist Church in Albion.

The Orleans County Historical Association has made possible the erection of two historic markers in the past and plans on a third one this season. This may also be placed in the Historic District although we are currently looking at two other significant locations, one of which is in Medina. These historical markers with their vignettes give us a sense of our local heritage in brief facts that can be easily remembered. Naturally, there is always more than the space for words allows. The message on the Swan marker is clear enough but there is indeed, more.

William G. Swan (1822-1896) came to Albion in 1835 with his parents from Saratoga County, N.Y. He and his father later engaged in business and in 1855 he became Superintendent of the International Railway Suspension Bridge at Niagara Falls, a position he held for thirty-eight years. In a codicil to his will, Mr. Swan left \$35,000 for the establishment of a community library to be known as Swan Library. He also directed his executors to set up an association and that the trustees buy a lot and erect a suitable building upon it. Instead, the trustees purchased the former mansion of

Roswell S. Burrows and transformed that residence into a library which occurred in 1899. Also, in 1899 the Swan Library Association was granted a charter which was signed by Melvil Dewey who was the Secretary to the Chancellor of the University of the State of N.Y. This is the same Melvil Dewey who initiated the Dewey Decimal System for shelving books in a library. The Swan Library officially opened to the public on March 17, 1900.

As one reads the fine print at the bottom of this historic marker we notice: "Lillian Achilles 1st Librarian." Miss Achilles (1871-1941) was born in Ridgeway, the daughter of Albert and Ellen Brown Achilles. She was a graduate of the Albion Academy and conducted a private primary school for a short time. Following that, she served for twelve years as librarian of the Albion Town Library which was eventually to become absorbed into Swan Library. This was located on the second floor of Central School which later became the old American Legion Hall, now called Central Hall. It was Miss Achilles' friendship with Mr. and Mrs. Swan that helped arouse their interest in establishing a fine library. Incidentally, they were all members of the First Baptist Church. When the Swan Library came into existence, Miss Achilles became the first librarian and served for the next forty-one years until her death. Her library science training was secured at Chicago University. She was indeed, a woman of vision and through her expertise she fashioned the library as many people knew it for over four decades.

Upon her death in 1941 the Orleans Republican noted in part: "From an early love of learning and of books developed Miss Achilles' life's passion, her alter ego, Swan Library. To generations of school children she was its living personification. Its gracious mistress, almost the library itself. She was friend and counselor, teacher and guide - and even philanthropist."

Miss Achilles was a fertile writer and possessed remarkable poetic skills. The following stanza is taken from her poem entitled EASTER.

I laugh with you my sunny daffodils,
My crocuses, all sunny-eyed and gay.
You rose from death, your life the law fulfills.
Earth tried to hold you, but you could not stay.