



History Explorer

Historical Society of Greater Lansing

www.LansingHistory.org

March 2019

Upcoming Events

The Faygo Book

By Joe Grimm

Thursday, March 21, 2019 – 7:00 p.m.

Library of Michigan – 702 W. Kalamazoo Street

“Remember when you were a kid?” If you’re from Michigan chances are that’s all you need to hear to start humming and thinking about Faygo, one of our favorite beverages for the last century.

On Thursday evening, March 21, HSGL and the Library of Michigan will be hosting a program by former Detroit Free Press reporter and current MSU Professor of Journalism Joe Grimm, the author of *The Faygo Book*, a 2018 Michigan notable title.

Faygo’s history dates back over a century when the Feigenson family opened a pop-bottling business in Detroit. Fitting their name on the eight-ounce bottles of strawberry, grape, and fruit punch flavored pop, however, wasn’t easy. Thus was born, in 1920, “Faygo.”

Soon Faygo became synonymous with Detroit. Grimm’s book is part history of the beverage, and part narrative of the city where it was long headquartered. He weaves tales of advertising gimmicks (including Alex Karras, Tommy Hearn, and Soupy Sales), applauds the company’s quiet support for its workers through labor disputes, and notes that by 1967, the production workforce was 75% black—perhaps one reason the factory was spared during the riot.

Learn the history of one of Michigan’s most beloved drinks—and enjoy a tasting of some classic Faygo flavors at this fun event!

Thanks to City Pulse for providing material for this article.

The ABCs of DNA & Genealogy

by Jessica M. Trotter

Thursday, April 11, 2019 – 7:00 p.m.

Library of Michigan – 702 W. Kalamazoo

Everywhere I turn, I hear people discussing their DNA results. But what can DNA testing really tell you? Should you take a test? What tests should you take? What does it all mean? DNA testing can be a powerful tool. Trotter’s presentation will offer a layman’s overview on tests, testing companies, and how you can use your results, as well as some of the pitfalls to DNA testing.

Jessica Trotter is an Archivist with a Master of Science in Information, Archives and Records Management Specialization from the University of Michigan—but works for the Capital Area District Libraries in Collection Development by day. Trotter’s background with DNA is as a genealogist and genealogy instructor. She first tested her own DNA in 2012 in response to students asking questions on DNA as testing prices came down, as well as out of curiosity. She hoped it might help with a hard-to-trace line of formerly enslaved African-Americans, but in retrospect it actually turned all of her research on that line upside down.

Her presentation on April 11 will look at the three major tests—Autosomal, Y-DNA, and Mitochondrial DNA. She’ll discuss the major testing companies—including Ancestry, 23 and Me, and MyHeritage. And she’ll walk the audience through what the results look like and what you can do with that information.

DNA is now an integral tool in genealogical research but not one to be taken lightly. You have to know going in that you may find out secrets you didn’t know about your family.

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Glimpses of the Lady of the House: Polly Kerr

By Valerie R. Marvin

When people speak of great houses, they often do so by referring to the men who financed, commissioned, and built them. The Ransom Olds house. The O.A. Jenison home. The Darius Moon home. The John Kerr house. Yet to do so is to forget that most, if not all of these homes sheltered not only these great men, but also the woman and children who shared their lives.

In fact, Lansing's greatest 19th-century homes would have been considered socially, in large part, the domain of the women who lived in them. It was during this century that men and women split apart during the day for the first time. Thanks to the growing Industrial Revolution and the market economy, more and more men left the home each day to run a business, practice a trade, or work in a shop. Meanwhile, their wives stayed home where they continued to tend the family hearth, cook, clean, look after the children, and see to endless chores such as the laundry and dusting.

For society women, there were admittedly fewer chores to do. Wealthy women could expect to employ both live-in and daytime staff, who would help with the aforementioned tasks. Yet for these women, their identities were still closely linked with the houses where they entertained social callers during regular "at homes," hosted the meetings of beneficial societies, and presided over births, marriages and deaths—all of which were then commemorated in the family home.

Thus, when we talk about the Turner Dodge home, or the Kerr home, we can't just talk about the men who earned the money that paid the bills. We also have to recognize their wives and the vital roles they played in both public and private.

Few women in Lansing enjoyed the social stature of Mrs. Polly Priscilla Phelps Kerr, the wife of John A. Kerr. Most people know John today as our city's second major, as someone who bought and sold property around the

Lansing area, as the man who planted many of the city's original trees, and as the publisher of the *Lansing State Republican*. Kerr also garnered, for many years, lucrative printing contracts with the state to publish such important historical documents as the red Michigan Manuals, House and Senate Journals, and copies of the Public Acts of the State of Michigan.

Today the Kerrs are also remembered for their fantastic Greek Revival-style home now located at 203 E. St. Joseph Street. HSGL members who joined us on our first Cherry Hill neighborhood walking tour will remember it as the massive white home that now faces I-496.

The Kerr house was clearly built to impress, from the four thick columns on the front porch to the plentiful, light-gathering windows and wide interior woodwork. Its style, today known as Greek Revival, was then referred to as the "National Style," which reveals something of its popularity. A nod to both classical civilization and the recent Greek Revolution, the style cropped up everywhere between the 1820s and the 1850s as Americans indiscriminately built homes, churches, theatres, banks, storefronts, and even waterworks in the mold of little white classical temples.

As John's wife, it would have been Polly's job to preside over the home and serve as hostess to a constant stream of social occasions. The Lansing Memorandum of 1976, written by the Historical Society of Greater Lansing, tells us that "He (John) used to send a team and wagon to Detroit, over the Old Plank Road, before winter set in, to bring a supply of liquor, canned goods, etc. in preparation for his famous open houses which were the most elaborate staged in Lansing at this time." Doubtless such receptions included not only other local notables, but many elected officials who sojourned to Lansing every two years for sessions in the wooden Capitol.

The Kerrs success was due, in part, to their party affiliation. John was a vocal Republican; who supported the party via his (aptly named) newspaper. It is not unreasonable to think, however, that Polly may have attended at least some social party functions with him, as articles from the period note that wives partook in some Republican-sponsored events.

Polly also had the care of her family to attend to. Born the daughter of Israel and Ruth Hawley Phelps in 1827, Polly herself gave birth to three children. Her eldest, a son named Charles, was born about 1851 when the family still lived in New York. As a youth Charles returned to

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his parents' native state to attend the Oneida Conference Seminary, a Methodist Episcopal school.

Mary Kerr, a daughter, was born a decade later in 1861. (This ten-year gap between siblings suggests that perhaps Polly endured some pregnancy related troubles in the intervening period.) Sadly, baby Mary died the following year. A short notice ran in the March 12 edition of the *Republican* stating that "On account of the death of the infant daughter of Mr. Kerr, the present issue has been unavoidably delayed. It will be published with regularity hereafter." This suggests that, for all of his business acumen, John may have been the kind of man who worried more about his wife and children than his work deadlines.



Polly Phelps Kerr

A third child, Elizabeth, came into the world in 1863. She would be the only one of the three children to ultimately survive her mother and live a full adult life.

The extended Kerr family also included, for a time at least, Polly's sister-in-law, Elizabeth (likely the baby's namesake) and her mother-in-law Catherine. In 1861 Polly undoubtedly helped plan and execute Elizabeth's wedding to George W. Wisner, Esq., of Pontiac on February 26. The Rev. Harvey Kitchell, of the First Congregational Church in Detroit, presided over the ceremony, which was held on a Tuesday morning at the Kerr house.

It's likely that Polly also spent at least some of her time in the family's extensive and successful garden. Small notices in the *Republican* from the 1860s praised a new variety of early strawberry called "Burr's new pine" from the family garden and a "fine head of Cauliflower" that John apparently shared with his staff. In the spring of 1866 the paper went so far as to praise the "finest bed of asparagus we ever saw, and we think it cannot be excelled in the State. His [Mr. Kerr's] table is now supplied with this choice vegetable, cut from the bed of which we speak." Even if she wasn't weeding the asparagus herself, Polly would have been heavily involved in preparing the family's menus and presiding over the dinner table.

Life wasn't only about duties, however. Polly and John Kerr, like many successful Victorians, also made sure to take time for travel and play. In 1859 the Kerr family traveled from Lansing to Niagara Falls, Canada, to see Mons. Blondin, "the most daring man of his day"

traverse twice across a two-inch tightrope over Niagara Falls.

There were also more serious, if no less pleasant, moments back in Lansing, such as when Mrs. Kerr joined 24 of her friends and neighbors in founding the Lansing Woman's Club in 1874. Dedicated to the study of literature, the arts, and the sciences, the Club provided curious women with a place to continue their educations and expand their knowledge.

Polly was also, according to her obituaries, extremely charitable and generous. ". . . During her years of plenty she gave with an unrestrained hand. Even during the later years of her life, when fortune dealt less kindly with her than previously, her

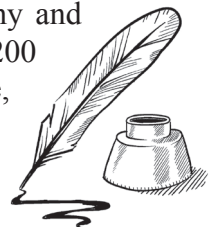
great heart would permit no denial of such assistance as she was still able to give the unfortunate even at great personal sacrifice."

Mrs. Kerr's long life of service and community engagement ended early in the morning of December 8, 1899. A funeral honoring Polly, who was affectionally mourned as "an old time resident" of the city, was held at the family home. Polly's remains were interred at Mt. Hope Cemetery, alongside those of her husband, mother-in-law, and her children Charles and Mary.

Upcoming Events - *Cont'd from page 1*

Story Tellers Needed!

HSGL is seeking volunteers to pen articles for our stalwart monthly newsletter. We're looking for stories that are important to you! Maybe you've always wanted to learn more about a famous Lansing resident, or trace the history of your neighborhood. You can tell us about the school you attended, or the place where you worship. Maybe there's a story in your family tree that begs to be shared! We're interested in any and all ideas. Articles should be about 1,200 words in length, and, if possible, should be accompanied by an image or two. Please send story ideas to info@lansinghistory.org or call 517-282-0671 to pitch an idea.





Historical Society of Greater Lansing
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