

A Grand Rapids Album, 1850-1875

During the evening's reception and dinner, a selection of photographs from Grand Rapids' early decades will be projected on two large screens to show what the city was like during Solomon Withey's time. Most of these images are from the splendid collection of historical images in the Local History Department of the Grand Rapids Public Library. Thomas Dilley, an attorney and collector, provided additional images. From these sources, over 200 images were selected for "A Grand Rapids Album, 1850-1875." The images are divided into three separate presentations: "People and Places of a Frontier City," "The Civil War Years," and "Peace and Prosperity."

People and Places of a Frontier City

Grand Rapids became a city on April 5, 1850. At the time, it had a population of about 2,500. The images selected for this first section include portraits produced by photographer Orsamus W. Horton and his partner, James Keeney. Because an exposure required several seconds, only a limited number of landscapes and streetscapes were made during this period. A few images show dirt streets and one and two story buildings in the fledgling city and its surrounding lumber camps and farms. In addition to these views of the people and places of early Grand Rapids, the first slide show segment also contains a selection of City Directory advertisements for some of the city's businesses, reflecting the goods and services available in the frontier city.

The Civil War Years

The people of Grand Rapids carefully followed the gathering clouds of war in late 1860. Ardent abolitionists prepared to go to war to end slavery. Although few supported the South's "peculiar institution," most residents hoped to find a peaceful resolution to the tensions gripping their nation. They supported Abraham Lincoln and the Republican ticket in the 1860 election. When the secession of southern states and the attack on Fort Sumter took the nation into war, the residents of Grand Rapids responded immediately to President Lincoln's 1861 call for volunteers. For the next four years, their news and conversations were dominated by stories of war—of faraway battles and home-front volunteer activities. Over 4,200 Kent County men served in the war. They served in infantry regiments, in cavalry and artillery units, as engineers, and as sharpshooters. By the war's end, 539 had died to preserve the Union. After the war, veterans participated in national organizations to strengthen bonds formed during the war, and to secure care for their disabled and aging comrades.

Peace and Prosperity

Following the war, Grand Rapids entered a period of unprecedented prosperity and growth. Immigrants flooded the city, raising its population to nearly 90,000 by 1900. More than 50 furniture factories, large and small, dominated both sides of the river as the "Valley City" became the furniture capital of America. Its products were known from coast to coast. Four-story commercial and government buildings, as well as large schools and hospitals, replaced earlier, more modest structures. Board sidewalks and brick streets gave downtown a different look, and a steady stream of freight and passenger trains connected the city with the rest of the nation. Not only had Civil War veterans saved their nation, when they returned home, they made Grand Rapids a decidedly modern city.