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## The Grand Rapids Public Museum: What's In A Building?

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## The Grand Rapids Public Museum: What's In A Building?

### Cover Page Footnote

Professor Matthew Daley Grand Valley State University

## Introduction

The Grand Rapids Public Museum has been a fixture in the city that shares its name for over 150 years. This historical institution has provided the local community with educational opportunities throughout the decades. It has been, and still is, a center for informal education to the community, where working people and the educated could come together to experience the wonders of science and the ethnic and social diversity of a nation. But what makes a museum? People may say that it is the collections and artifacts. However, if those collections and artifacts cannot be viewed, or it is very difficult to be viewed, then it is for not. It is the building itself that turns a museum into a professional institution and often times can be a centerpiece of the visitors' experience itself. Four of the top thirty most renowned buildings in the world, for their architecture and style, are museums<sup>1</sup>. The Grand Rapids Public Museum has provided educational and community opportunities to the local area before and after 1937, however, a split was made from amateurism to professionalism with the procurement of a permanent building in 1937.

## Pre-Modern Museum: Before the Building

John Ball originally developed the museum in 1854, along with the associates of his law firm, and the scientific community, as the *Grand Rapids Lyceum of Natural History*. The intention of this fledgling organization was to bring together numerous private collections and allow people to study the different artifacts and specimens. The group met in the city's first high school located on the corner of Lyon and Ransom<sup>2</sup>. The group was short lived, however, as the attendance began to decline and the antebellum of the Civil War was beginning to grip the nation.

The resurgence began in the summer of 1865 after of the Civil War with curious young high school students who wanted to pick up where the Lyceum had left off. The renewed vigor of the students brought them to create the *Grand Rapids Scientific Club*. This small club had all the workings of a professional organization, yet still lacked a place to keep their collections, other than their homes. As the collections and memberships grew for the Scientific Club, rooms were rented out downtown to house both people and artifacts.

This lack of a defined space made it difficult for the interested academics and general public to fully utilize the different collections. Thus, with the aid of Professor E.A. Strong, the local Superintendent of the Schools, the club began to branch out to other organizations. With this new outreach, the organization was renamed the *Kent Scientific Institute*. The Scientific In-

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<sup>1</sup> Artifice. [http://www.greatbuildings.com/greatest\\_hits.html](http://www.greatbuildings.com/greatest_hits.html). The museums that made the list are: (6) Guggenheim Museum, (20) Guggenheim Bilbao, (22) Centre Pompidou, (23) Pyramide du Louvre. The Roman Colosseum was first on the list.

<sup>2</sup> Julie C. Stivers, *The Presence of the Past: The Public Museum of Grand Rapids at 150*. pp. 1-12, Grand Rapids: The Public Museum of Grand Rapids, 2004.

stitute now encompassed the whole of the county, along with the city. The original members of the Lyceum, such as John Ball, joined the newly renamed organization and offered up personal collections then gathering dust in their homes.

The Kent Scientific Institute jumped to action with a fervent effort of the original and new members of the growing organization. The telephone and train transportation, both new inventions of the time, allowed the newly reorganized Scientific Institute to reach a much larger community. In 1871, the *Jackson Daily Citizen* wrote an article about the Union fair that was taking place in Grand Rapids. This article, among the earliest press coverage of the museum, discussed Mrs. Edgecomb's ornithological collection on display at the fair grounds<sup>3</sup>. The reputation of the Kent Scientific Institute began to grow. People were beginning to seek out the different expertise that the different members had to offer. With the improvement of communication and transportation the members themselves were more accessible. In 1881, the *Jackson Citizen Patriot* had John Ball, in an article, discuss the possibility of winter weather productions based on data that he had gathered since the 1830s. This article is evidence that a large audience was seeking the help of the Institute<sup>4</sup>. The credibility of the Kent Scientific Institute was becoming more recognized in the media. However, it was still discombobulated and difficult to study the different collections without a single dedicated building that others could visit. This was something that the Institute wanted to remedy as they found the value, not only in the space provided, but also in the establishment of a purposed building for the Institute.

#### Not Their Own, But a Place to Call Home: The "First Building"

In 1881, thanks to the help of E.A. Strong, the Institute began to move their collections into Central High School. The Board of Education agreed to allow the high school to dedicate a few rooms for the different collections of the Scientific Institute. This finally allowed the fast growing Institute to have a place people could come and listen to lectures, view newly obtained objects, and study old collections. It was not their own, but it was a place that the Institute could call home and have academics, the public, and school children utilize their artifacts with relative ease.

In 1893, the *Grand Rapids Press* printed a short announcement for the Kent Scientific Institute, "The semi-monthly meeting of the Kent Scientific Institute will be held at Central school Friday evening. R. M. Poot, professor of natural science at Union school will present a paper on the analysis of soils."<sup>5</sup> This press announcement is evidence that the Institute was beginning to gain a foothold in the community and abroad with a single place that people could meet.

The Institute continued to grow and provided more educational opportunities to the local community, especially the school children of the school that they shared. Again, this was short lived. As the Institute began to grow, so did the population of the city of Grand Rapids. This ex-

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<sup>3</sup> "Union Fair At Grand Rapids. Second Day's Doings -Large Attendance- Total Number of Entries - To-Day's." *Jackson Daily Citizen*, September 19, 1871, p. 4.

<sup>4</sup> "Some Past Winters." *Jackson Citizen Patriot*, March 3, 1881, p. 2.

<sup>5</sup> "Kent Scientific Institute." *Grand Rapids Press*, February 17, 1893, p. 1.

ponential growth meant that the school was growing and space was a premium. The *Grand Rapids Press* published an article in 1898 that discussed the clash that was happening between the Board of Education and the Kent Scientific Institute. In the meeting the Board of education wanted to remove the Scientific Institute's use of space in order to free up classrooms. The Scientific Institute had countered, indicating that a building that would properly house the collection would be at a cost of \$15,000, funding that the institute did not have<sup>6</sup>. This meeting between the two organizations happened only fourteen days after the Scientific Institute had elected a new committee to run the organization<sup>7</sup>. Thus the new committee's primary job became finding a building to house the Institutes collections.

### House on the Hill: The First Dedicated Building

In 1903, after much debating the Kent Scientific Institute was moved to the Howlett home at the corner of Jefferson and Washington in the Heritage Hill neighborhood<sup>8</sup>. In December of that year both the *Grand Rapids Press*<sup>9</sup> and the *Jackson Citizen Patriot*<sup>10</sup> published articles discussing the opening of the new museum building to the public on January 7, 1904. A buzz of the new museum building was officially circulating around the community and the state. With the new space that the Howlett home provided museum collections began to expand at a fast rate. In 1905 the Kent Scientific Institute purchased a massive seventy-six foot Finn whale skeleton<sup>11</sup>. In 1909 the museum acquired an Egyptian mummy along with numerous supporting artifacts<sup>12</sup>. The growth and popularity of the newly placed museum lead to another change in organization.

Through fast changes, in the spanned of only seven years, the Kent Scientific Institute was looked over by three different organizations, due to shifting financial abilities, until the final organization, The Board of Art and Museum Commissioners assumed control on April 1, 1917<sup>13</sup>. Even with the new changes in organization Professor Herbert E. Sargent, curator, continued to collect artifacts and specimens until even the Howlett house was beginning to feel the stresses of the massive collection. In order to compensate for the lack of space, yet again, a pull barn was

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<sup>6</sup> "May Be A Clash Between the Board of Education and the Kent Scientific Institute." *Grand Rapids Press*, February 19, 1898, p. 3.

<sup>7</sup> "Kent Scientific Institute. Chairman of the Committees Were Appointed by President." *Grand Rapids Herald*, February 5, 1898, p. 3.

<sup>8</sup> Grand Rapids Public Museum. "Habitats Exhibit." Third Floor

<sup>9</sup> "Open The Museum Date Has Been Set for Thursday, January 7. Speakers Invited Prof. Griffith." *Grand Rapids Press*, December 22, 1903, p. 1.

<sup>10</sup> "Grand Rapids Museum To be Dedicated With Interesting Ceremonies Jan. 7." *Jackson Citizen Patriot*, December 23, 1903, p. 1.

<sup>11</sup> Grand Rapids Public Museum. "Whale Wall Plaque." Main Galleria

<sup>12</sup> Grand Rapids Public Museum. "Egyptian Exhibit." Third Floor

<sup>13</sup> Julie C. Stivers, *The Presence of the Past: The Public Museum of Grand Rapids at 150*. pp. 18-19. Grand Rapids: The Public Museum of Grand Rapids, 2004.

purchased and artifacts were displayed in downtown bank windows. With the out-of-control collecting habits of Professor Sargent, Henry L. Ward replaced him in 1922. Mr. Ward attempted to raise money for a new building for the museum through a bond proposal, but the city voted down the proposal. With a lack of money and space Mr. Ward needed a person that could turn the museum around and make it the institute that it had set out to be. In the late 1920s Mr. Ward hired Frank L. DuMond, a young instructor of forestry at Cornell University actively searching for the position, as Curator of Education<sup>14</sup>. By 1934 Frank DuMond was named acting Director of the Kent Scientific Institute and would bring the museum into the new age, the modern age.

### The Modern Age: The First Official Museum Building

As Frank DuMond was getting used to his new director's position at the Kent Scientific Institute, the nation had spent the last five years in the grips of the Great Depression. The lack of money and space was no longer the issue that the museum had to contend with, but the community as a whole. During this difficult time the museum became a mecca of free educational opportunities for the community. Not only did people have the option of visiting the museum and its annex, but DuMond made sure to take the collections once again to the people, specifically the school children of the local area. The works of the museum and DuMond's efforts did not go unnoticed as the City of Grand Rapids realized the value of the lectures, educational programs, and community outreach that the museum offered to the surrounding area. Thus, with good use of currently provided funds by the WPA, FERA, and NYA, DuMond sought funding from the WPA for the museum's first official building<sup>15</sup>.

On October 11, 1937, President Roosevelt approved a grant that allowed the museum to be built. As soon as the grant was approved the doors of the Howlett house were closed to the public in order to prepare for the move to the new museum, which was set to be located on 54 Jefferson Street. 1937 is the definitive year that the museum made a leap into professional standing as a museum with an official building being constructed specifically tailored to its needs and to showcase its collections for the public. It would take another three years for the museum to finally be opened to the public due to difficulties securing governmental aid, but on June 12, 1940 the doors to the newly constructed art deco building were opened. The museum once again went through another name change to *The Grand Rapids Public Museum*.

The new museum brought many curious people through the doors and the institute, due its new building, could finally feature many of its interesting items in a brilliant public display. The new building also brought in a new talent, artists. The large walls of the new building were a prime area to hang new works so that people all around the state, and now the country, could come see famous works along with interesting artifacts. The growth of the museum continued to be explosive.

In the early 1960s, the museum made leaps and bounds in its new professional status. In 1961, the Grand Rapids Public Museum was listed in the *International Directory of Anthro-*

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<sup>14</sup> "Finding Aid for the Frank Lee DuMond Papers." *Grand Rapids Public Library* (2009): 3.

<sup>15</sup> WPA - Works Progress Administration, FERA - Federal Emergency Relief Administration, NYA - National Youth Administration

*logical Institutions*<sup>16</sup>. The museum had also been utilizing a secondary building since 1958 due to the vastly popular lecture series and education programs it provided. In 1962 the museum purchased a piece of cutting edge technology that enabled it to host planetarium shows. David L. DeBruyn was the person that was able to make this new technology come to life and is still with the museum in emeritus status. DeBruyn was also a crucial player in building and obtaining the Vein Observatory in 1970, which is still associated with the museum today. As the museum began to gain recognition for its reputable status in the professional and academic realm, it began to turn towards the community and help preserve its own history. This was achieved through the combination of professional memberships, adherence to standards, and the consolidation of the whole central organization into one main building.

In 1964 the museum worked to establish the Blandford Nature Center just west of Grand Rapids. The center allowed students to study natural history of the local area in a relatively untouched and undeveloped area. In 1969 the clock tower of 1888 Grand Rapids City Hall was torn down. The museum obtained many things from this historical site, the clock from the tower and many of the intricate floor tiles are just a few items that the museum protects from destruction<sup>17</sup>. In 1971 the museum had a big year. It was given responsibility and oversight to the Norton Indian Mounds<sup>18</sup> and it became the nation's first museum to be accredited by the American Association of Museums, which it is still a part of today. In 1974 the museum took over the title to the Voigt Victorian House in Heritage Hill. The final site to be placed in the museums care is the Calkins Law Office that the museum had moved near the building in 1971, restored it, and opened it in 1976<sup>19</sup>. Toward the end of the 1970s the museum felt the growing pains of the large collections in its numerous structures. Once again, the museum was looking for a new home.

### The Modern Age: The Present Day Museum

After nearly twenty years of fundraising and finding funds through other means, the Grand Rapids Public Museum moved to its current home on the Grand River<sup>20</sup>. Thanks to philanthropic efforts by such families as DeVos, Meijer, and VanAndel the museum, now located at 272 Pearl Street, was officially opened to the public in 1994. This new building is unlike any of the other buildings the museum had resided in before. It was specifically tailored and built around the collections themselves. A new addition to the museums collection was a 1928 Spillman Carousel relocated from Barnsville, Pennsylvania. The museum created an entire pavilion to house

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<sup>16</sup> "The International Directory of Anthropological Institutes." *Current Anthropology* 2, no. 3 (1961): 286-298.

<sup>17</sup> Grand Rapids Public Museum. "C is for City Hall." Galleria

<sup>18</sup> Grand Rapids Public Museum. "Anishinabek Exhibit." Third Floor

<sup>19</sup> Alex Forist., "Calkins Law Office." Grand Rapids Public Museum.  
[http://www.grmuseum.org/museum\\_sites/calkins](http://www.grmuseum.org/museum_sites/calkins).

<sup>20</sup> The city of Grand Rapids levied a tax in order to help pay for the current museum. City of Grand Rapids. "An Inside Look at the City of Grand Rapids."  
<http://grcity.us/administrative-services/customer-service/Pages/An-Inside-Look-at-the-City-of-Grand-Rapids.aspx>.

the carousel and illustrates dedication in tailoring the new building to the collections<sup>21</sup>. With this emphasis on making the building a tool itself to intrigue visitors to the museum, the original intent of the institution could be honored with the best resources of the times, education of the community.

The Grand Rapids Public Museum is fitted with several classrooms, a demonstration laboratory, the 255 seat Meijer Theater, and the 146 seat Roger B. Chaffee Planetarium<sup>22</sup>. These different spaces are used for several different programs that range on a variety of topics; Boy Scout Merit Badge University, Sights and Sounds of the Civil War, Culture Days, and many more<sup>23</sup>. However, it is the building that allows many of these programs to take place.

Even though the museum is now a state-of-the-art tool of education, it still looks back and honors its history. The museum still oversees all the different structures that it had resided in or obtained throughout the years. The old Jefferson Street museum was enlarged with an adjoining structure and now houses the community archives of which there are over 200,000 artifacts<sup>24</sup>. The Voigt Victorian House is used for tours and events, such as Fashion & Tea Events. The Veen Observatory is used year round and is open to the public on specific days throughout the year. The Calkins Law Office can only viewed from the outside with special exceptions to view the inside. Plans are to restore the building to be open to the public. The Norton Mounds are still in the state that the museum obtained them and the plans are to keep the grounds in that state. Finally, the current museum houses many of the wonders of Grand Rapids historical pieces including a one-fourth scale rendering of how the street of Grand Rapids used to look in the 1890s. Many of the different collections that the museum had begun with in 1854 are still a part of the museum. From 1854 the museum has endured many different changes, but has continued its commitment to educational and community outreach programs. In hindsight, the current building is yet another stage of the museum's life and the future will without a doubt usher in a new age of excitement and exploration.

### A Look to the Future and Conclusion

The Grand Rapids Public museum, one of the oldest museums in both the state and the nation, has plenty of life still in it. Throughout the years it has changed its name and its appearance, but its core values of education and community have been unwavering. The Grand Rapids Public Museum has provided educational and community opportunities to the local area before and after 1937, however, a split was made from amateurism to professionalism with the procurement of a permanent building in 1937. Ever since the step into the professional and accredited realm, the Grand Rapids Public Museum has grown exponentially to a global status, far beyond the original reach of only a city.

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<sup>21</sup> Grand Rapids Public Museum. "1928 Spillman Carousel." Cook Carousel Pavilion

<sup>22</sup> The Roger B. Chaffee Planetarium is named after the Grand Rapids-born astronaut who lost his life in the 1967 Apollo 1 spacecraft fire. Grand Rapids Public Museum. "Roger B. Chaffee Planetarium."  
<http://www.grmuseum.org/planetarium>.

<sup>23</sup> Gina Bivins,. "Educational Events List 2011." Public Programs Manager

<sup>24</sup> Alex Forist,. "Tour Introduction." Collections Curator

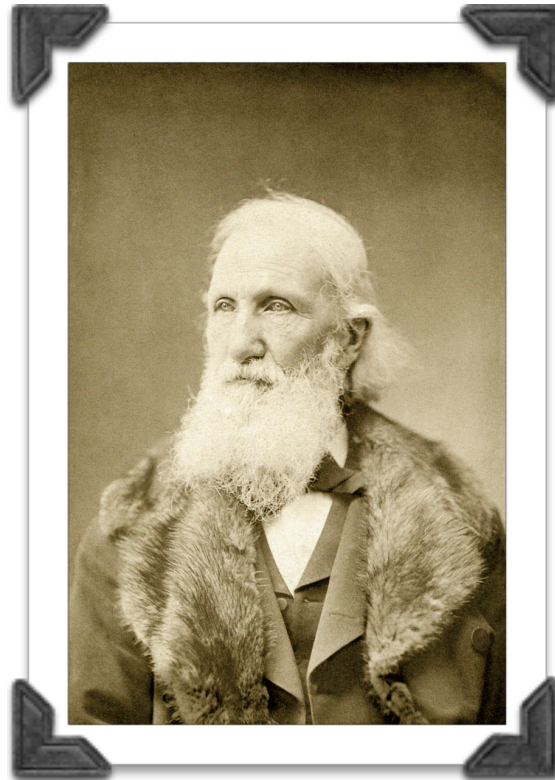


So what is in a building? In the Grand Rapids Public Museum's instance the building is its identity. The museum has truly become a collection and a centerpiece itself. The building is what made the difference between several discombobulated personal collections, to a singular entity that people see as a symbol of Grand Rapids.

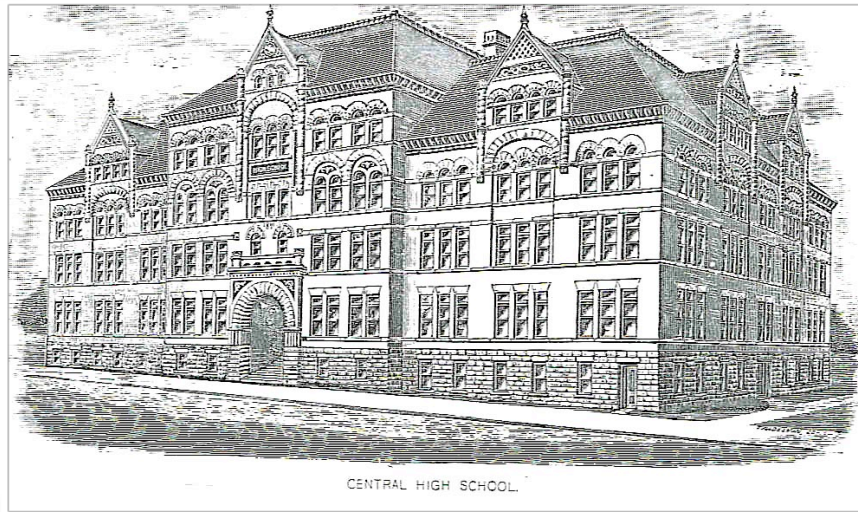
Appendix



(Cover Image) This image is the entry way of the original building of the Grand Rapids Public Museum located on Jefferson Street. Image Credit: "Former Grand Rapids Public Museum" by docksidepress



This is an image of John Ball (1794-1884) photo ca. 1870s-early 1880s.  
Image Credit: Powers Behind Grand Rapids - Blog



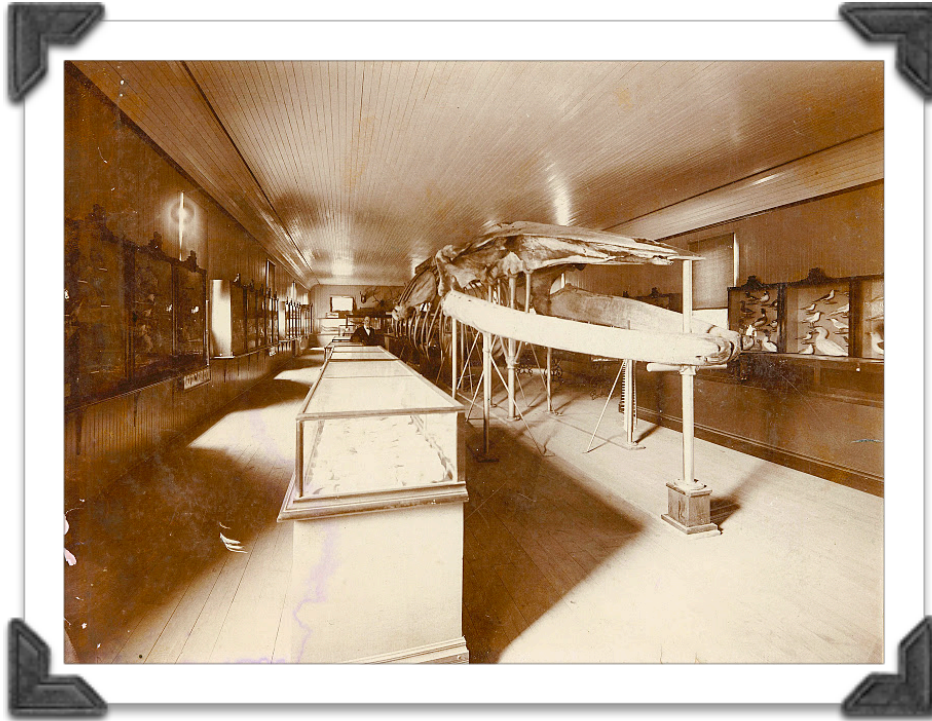
This is a rendering of Central High School as it looked in 1893.

Image Credit: <http://kent.migenweb.net/schools/centralhs/history.html>



This is a photo from 1910 of the Howlett House that housed the collections of the Kent Scientific Institute after the collection was moved from Central High School.

Image Credit: The Presence of the Past, Alex Forist Collection



This is a photo (ca. 1910) of the large Finn whale skeleton that the museum obtained in 1905. It was displayed in a pull barn across the street from the Howlett house.

Image Credit: The Presence of the Past, Alex Forist Collection



This is an artist rendering of the Grand Rapids Public Museum in 1940.

Image Credit: Painting by Roger Allen found in the Alex Forist Collection



The Calkins Law Office.  
Image Credit: Brain Belches



The Voigt Victorian House  
Image Credit: The Presence of the Past, Alex Forist Collection



The Norton Mounds

Image Credit: The Presence of the Past, Alex Forist Collection



1928 Spillman Carousel

Image Credit: Mackin-Art



Grand Rapids Public Museum

Image Credit: The Presence of the Past, Alex Forist Collection

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*-Provided the top architectural buildings in the world.*

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*-The events list allowed me to show current academic and community events that are going on at the museum.*

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<http://grcity.us/administrative-services/customer-service/Pages/An-Inside-Look-at-the-City-of-Grand-Rapids.aspx>.

*-Provided a record to show the taxes collected for the construction of the museum.*

"Finding Aid for the Frank Lee DuMond Papers." *Grand Rapids Public Library* (2009): 3.

*-Provided background to Frank L. DuMond.*

Forist, Alex. "Calkins Law Office." Grand Rapids Public Museum.

[http://www.grmuseum.org/museum\\_sites/calkins](http://www.grmuseum.org/museum_sites/calkins).

*-Provided history of the Calkins Law Office.*

Forist, Alex. "Tour Introduction." Collections Curator

*-Provided number of artifacts in the museum's collection.*

"Grand Rapids Museum To be Dedicated With Interesting Ceremonies Jan. 7." *Jackson Citizen Patriot*, December 23, 1903, p. 1.

*-Positive view of the museum.*

Grand Rapids Public Museum. "1928 Spillman Carousel." Cook Carousel Pavilion

*-Provided history of the carousel.*

Grand Rapids Public Museum. "Anishinabek Exhibit." Third Floor

*-Provided history of the Norton Mounds.*

Grand Rapids Public Museum. "C is for City Hall." Galleria

*-Provided history of the demolished 1888 City Hall.*

Grand Rapids Public Museum. "Egyptian Exhibit." Third Floor

*-Provided date for obtainment of artifacts.*

Grand Rapids Public Museum. "Habitats Exhibit." Third Floor

*-Provided history and background of the Howlett House*

Grand Rapids Public Museum. "Roger B. Chaffee Planetarium." <http://www.grmuseum.org/planetarium>.

*-Provided information on size and namesake history.*

Grand Rapids Public Museum. "Whale Wall Plaque." Main Galleria

*-Provided history of obtainment and size of skeleton.*

"Kent Scientific Institute. Chairman of the Committees Were Appointed by President." *Grand Rapids Herald*, February 5, 1898, p. 3.

*-Neutral view of the museum.*

"Kent Scientific Institute." *Grand Rapids Press*, February 17, 1893, p. 1.

*-Provided quote. Neutral view of the museum.*

"May Be A Clash Between the Board of Education and the Kent Scientific Institute." *Grand Rapids Press*, February 19, 1898, p. 3.

*-Negative view of the museum.*

"Open The Museum Date Has Been Set for Thursday, January 7. Speakers Invited Prof. Griffith." *Grand Rapids Press*, December 22, 1903, p. 1.

*-Positive view of the museum.*

Professor Matthew Daley, 2011

*-Provided corrections and wording.*

"Some Past Winters." *Jackson Citizen Patriot*, March 3, 1881, p. 2.

*-Positive view of museum.*

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*-This was the main source of information throughout much of the research. Stivers' piece provided numerous sections of historical data and dates.*

"The International Directory of Anthropological Institutes." *Current Anthropology* 2, no. 3 (1961): 286-298.

*-International listing, proving a global reach of the museum.*

"Union Fair At Grand Rapids. Second Day's Doings -Large Attendance- Total Number of Entries - To-Day's." *Jackson Daily Citizen*, September 19, 1871, p. 4.

*-Positive view of the museum.*