

Mississippi Blues Trail heads to village

Written by STEVE OSTERMANN
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Trustees accept Grafton Blues Association gift of marker that will commemorate community's role in music history

Grafton will soon become one of the stops on the legendary Mississippi Blues Trail.

The Village Board on Monday accepted a donation from the Grafton Blues Association for a trail marker that will be placed in a park to commemorate the community's role in American music history.

The two-sided, 42-by-45-inch marker, which costs \$6,000, will contain historical information and photos explaining the connection between the Mississippi-born blues culture and Paramount studio that recorded and produced blues music at the former Wisconsin Chair Factory plant in Grafton in the 1920s and '30s.

During those years, legendary artists such as Charley Patton, Son House, Skip James, Blind Blake and Big Bill Broonzy traveled to Grafton to be recorded. The plant is believed to have produced one quarter of all blues 78-rpm records issued at the time.

"It's a great opportunity for Grafton to let people learn about the music heritage they have here," said Kris Raymond, president of the association, which is finalizing an agreement with the Mississippi Blues Commission for permission to erect a local marker.

"We're really excited about the chance to do this."

Plans call for the marker to be unveiled during the fifth annual Paramount Blues Festival at Lime Kiln Park in Grafton on Sept.

17 and 18 and be installed in the Chair Factory Park at the northeast corner of 12th Avenue and Falls Road.

The Chair Factory Park — which is being developed by the village as a historical and recreational venue — currently has an informational panel that explains the site's significance as the former location of the factory. The trail marker, officials said, will replace the panel, which will be reinstalled at a later date as part of the park project.

The Mississippi Blues Trail, created by the Mississippi Blues Commission in 2005, extends from southern Mississippi to

Memphis, Tenn., and contains more than four dozen interpretive markers. Developed by music scholars and historians, the markers commemorate musicians' birthplaces and grave sites, radio stations, dance halls and other sites.

Most of the markers are in Mississippi, but several have been placed in Alabama, Arkansas and Tennessee. Last year, a marker was installed in Chicago to commemorate the migration of Delta blues artists such as Muddy Waters to the city.

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The Grafton marker will extend the trail to its northernmost point. The marker will be made from hand-cast aluminum and have raised letters covered in gold leaf on one side. The reverse side will have an inset vinyl panel with high-resolution images and text.

The village's Community Development Authority is expected on July 14 to consider contributing revenue from the downtown tax incremental financing district to help cover the cost of the marker.

"It reinforces the village's history connecting it to the blues," Village Administrator Darrell Hofland said of the marker. "This will help tell the story for those who are not familiar with Grafton's role."

Raymond said her association contacted the Mississippi Blues Commission after learning that markers are being installed at places outside Mississippi and secured a sponsorship agreement.

"People have planned their vacations to visit Grafton because of the music history here," she said. "This will give them even more reason to come here."

In addition to possible funding from the village, the Grafton Blues Association is planning to accept donations and hold fund-raisers to cover the \$6,000 cost.

"I think Grafton needs this and deserves it," said Peter Raymond, Kris' husband and a fellow association member.

The Village Board accepted the association's offer at the recommendation of the Parks and Recreation Board.