Helen Ferris 150th Birthday Celebration  
September 9, 2003  
By David L. Eisler, President

It is a pleasure to gather here today to honor Helen Ferris, who was born one hundred fifty years ago on September 7th, 1853. She was born in Richland, NY and entered the Oswego Normal and Training School where she met Woodbridge Ferris and graduated in July, 1873. She taught in Franklin, Indiana, and Fulton, Indiana. After marriage to Woodbridge Ferris on December 23rd, 1874, they taught in Spencer, NY, Freeport, IL, and Dixon, IL. After five years when Woodbridge Ferris was superintendent of schools in Pittsfield, IL, they moved to Big Rapids during the summer of 1884 organizing the Ferris Industrial School. Mrs. Ferris taught at the Ferris School and then at the Ferris Institute until 1901, when health challenges forced her retirement.

I want to thank the members of subgroup of the History Committee who have created this celebration, Jennifer Ditto, William Keller, Mary Kay MacIver, Todd Price, Patty Terryn, Kristine Szot-Green, and Jim Wessel. I want to draw special attention to Harry Dempsey who leads this group most effectively.

For these comments, I am indebted to the University Archivist, Melinda McMartin, who shared with me this wonderful volume on Mrs. Ferris, put together by Woodbridge Ferris, as a memorial when she died in 1917. It is easy to sense his love and admiration for this remarkable woman, his wife of forty-two years.

In these pages, Mrs. Ferris is described as a beautiful, dignified, gracious woman who loved books and drama, and who delighted in nature –

She had the enthusiasm of a child for getting out of doors into the sunshine, where she could laugh with the flowers, the trees, and the birds.

Mr. Ferris describes their home in these words,

I was born with a melancholy disposition. Mrs. Ferris furnished the sunshine for her husband and boys... She listened patiently to the trials and tribulations of her children and her husband... Her love and sympathy for children extended far beyond her own hearthstone.

I find especially interesting his observations about Mrs. Ferris’ teaching,

Her love for young people was profound. She was eager to assist, direct, encourage, and instruct the most backward and discouraged students... Her gracious manners won the
abiding love of all who came under her instruction. Her students exerted themselves to the utmost simply because they could not summon courage to disappoint her.

Perhaps most tellingly,

Whatever there is in the Ferris Institute that resembles the work of the teacher of teachers, had its origin in the seventeen years of loving service rendered by Mrs. Ferris.

At this distance it is difficult to know the entirety of Mrs. Ferris’ contributions to the beginnings of our university. However I believe strongly that her efforts were critical to the success and survival of the Ferris School and Institute. As we stand here in this residence hall dedicated to her memory, it seems both fitting and proper to take time to consider the heritage of thoughtful, kind, and enlightened instruction that she helped create here for all of us.

Thank you for taking to join us today for this celebration of Mrs. Ferris. By all accounts Helen Ferris was a great lover and admirer of the writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson. I too find meaning in his works and believe that were she here today she would voice her support for his words –

The secret in education lies in respecting the student.