I want to begin this morning by thanking the history task force. We are fortunate to have a wonderful tradition and a very unique and special history at Ferris State University. I appreciate very much their efforts to help this history come alive for each of us and to remind us of our heritage.

As a group they have worked to transform this room into a living memorial to our founders, Woodbridge and Helen Ferris. And what a remarkable job they have done. I want to introduce to you the members of the History Commemoration Task Force here with us this morning – chair Harry Dempsey, Karen Blanzy, Bob Carter, Mary Gallagher-Eustice, Bill Keller, Beth Krueger, Mary Kay Maclver, Melinda, McMartin, Larry Martin, Patty Terryn, and Jennifer Thede.

I have asked the task force to create one event a semester that reminds us of what others have done to create this wonderful university. Perhaps you were able to attend the 75th anniversary of the Alumni Building last fall. Next year they are planning to inaugurate Founders Day, it will celebrate the first day of classes at the Big Rapids Institute on Sept. 1, 1884. This will be an opportunity for us to come together as a campus community to celebrate our past and to consider our future.

Today I have the happy opportunity to talk about one of my favorite subjects – Woodbridge and Helen Ferris. For me it is appropriate that we consider both together, because both of them as a team began this proprietary school here in Big Rapids in 1884.

Helen and Woodbridge were both born the same year, in 1853, he in January, she in September. They met at Oswego Normal Training School in NY and were married just before Christmas in 1873.

After a year working together at the Spencer Academy, they moved from New York to Illinois, where Woodbridge lead a series of business schools before becoming superintendent of the Pitsfield, Illinois schools, a post he held from 1879-1884.

This was a particularly important experience in that it convinced Woodbridge that he did not want to work in public education. He wanted the freedom of a private institution where he could establish education and rules for instruction in the model he believed was correct.
Why Big Rapids? There are some facts and a number of theories. They include –

- the railroad stopped in Big Rapids,
- Woodbridge had placed an advertisement that a businessman in Big Rapids responded to,
- Woodbridge had a partner, but didn’t really want one, so he chose some place he didn’t want the school,
- There was no competition, later Woodbridge would say there was no competition because there was no market,
- Wanted private school, there was already a good public school here.

Whatever the case – Helen and Woodbridge did move to Big Rapids, and together opened the Big Rapids Industrial School, a place for “lumberjacks, miners, farmers’ sons and daughters, and girls who work in factories.”

They began with 15 students, the picture I looked at showed 10 men and 5 women. This number in four months grew to 50 students.

An evening school was added and a business curriculum added. With two teachers, new subjects required that they learn them. I read one early instance where shorthand was added and Woodbridge quickly learned the book and techniques. Once he had set upon an approach he followed it until a better one came along.

The school was strict, with high expectations for study and behavior.

Mrs. Ferris had begun teaching at age 16 and was well known for her skills in teaching mathematics. The state superintendent of private instruction called her the best geometry teacher in Michigan.

I find especially interesting Woodbridge’s observations about Helen’s 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.*

Woodbridge had extraordinarily poor luck with banks and on several occasions saw banks go under that contained the tuition deposits of the students or for building projects. Each time he personally restored the funds.

He would go on to be twice elected Governor of Michigan in 1912 and 1914. Today at the capital outside the House chambers stands a large picture of Mr. Ferris.
We owe much of what we are to this unique couple, described in this way –

The one that stands above all others, is the President, WN Ferris, a man whose personality attracts and holds, whose untiring energy wrings success from defeat and whose boundless energy permeates the very walls of the institution that stands as a monument to his labors. This man, now in some respects a national figure, is blessed above many teachers in that he has the power to win the esteem, the confidence, the love of young people. No small part of his success, however, has been due to his wife, who has given to her husband magnificent encouragement and help. Long may the President and his noble wife, through the Ferris Institute, continue to make the world better.

Mrs. Ferris developed health problems and stopped teaching in 1901, although she would continue to support the Institute and its activities until her death in 1917. I have had the opportunity to read the booklet from her memorial service. In it Woodbridge poignantly states –

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.

Woodbridge would be elected to the US Senate in 1922 and died on March 4, 1928 at age 75 in Washington, DC while serving in the Senate. His body was brought home to Big Rapids on a train draped in black. Crowds of mourners met the train and attended the ceremonies in his honor. Citizens of Big Rapids were instructed to not work outside during the time of his funeral.

Together Woodbridge and Helen Ferris created this wonderful institution where we stand today. Their willingness to make a difference, to provide the opportunity of education and to help change the lives of young people are traditions we still celebrate today.

It is a pleasure to join with you today, to celebrate the lives of our founders and to dedicate this room in their honor.