

History of the Huron River and Allen's Creek in Ann Arbor

Grace Shackman

“Our river is the most beautiful I have beheld and abounding with the most valuable fish.” This is how John Allen, Ann Arbor’s co-founder, described the Huron River one year after he had settled here. The fact that Ann Arbor is situated where it is, in a scenic and hilly location, is because of the Huron. When Allen and his partner, Elisha Rumsey, set out from Detroit in January of 1824, looking for a good spot to start a new town, they happened along an oak opening on the banks of a river. Finding the spot not only beautiful, but practical since the river could furnish waterpower, food, drink, and transportation, they hurried back to Detroit to stake a claim on 640 acres of this land.

Allen and Rumsey’s land included a stream, which they early on named Allen’s Creek. When they returned from Detroit they set up camp on what is today the corner of First and Huron, now Robby’s at the Ice House, near the creek so they would be able to get fresh water for drinking and washing. Later Rumsey and his wife Mary Ann built a house on this site.

Both Allen and Rumsey were escaping less than perfect pasts: Allen was in debt, Rumsey had some sort of romantic scandal. For them, starting a new town was starting a new life, but it was also by necessity a business venture. To afford to stay they had to sell their lots, which meant they had to convince others that Ann Arbor was a good place to settle. That the river was one of the town’s draws is seen in the advertisement they placed in the *Detroit Gazette* in June of 1824, saying, pleasantly located on the lower Huron”.

People did respond to Allen and Rumsey’s invitations, and in two years there were enough settlers to support the operation of a grist mill powered by the Huron River. In the summer of 1826, under the direction of George Noyes, almost all the settlers in the county gathered for a mill raising, similar to a barn raising. According to an account in Charles C. Chapman’s 1881 *History of Washtenaw County, Michigan*, “there was a general time of rejoicing that flour could be obtained short of Detroit. The mill was soon in running order and well patronized.” Soon a saw mill was added to the river industries, a big help to home building, and later a woolen mill. Another river industry was the harvesting of ice in the winter, to be used in the summer to keep food cold in ice boxes.

For industries that didn’t need to use water for power, but just for cooling or cleaning, the water from Allen’s Creek could be put to use. In the days when the area around Ann Arbor was still inhabited by wild animals, four tanneries were built on or near the creek in order to use its water to soak their pelts. A foundry used the creek’s water for its sand casting, and two breweries used the creek water to cool their beer.

In the 19th century, the key to a town’s prosperity was the presence of a railroad. Towns vied with each other to get the train to pass through their town; many promising settlements became just a crossroad after the train bypassed them. But, Ann Arbor was blessed with two railroads, the Michigan Central going east and west, put in along the Huron River in 1839, and the Ann Arbor Railroad going north and south, laid along the main branch of Allen Creek in 1878. Both were placed where they were because of the flat bed along the water’s edge.

In the 20th century, the creek and river became less important to Ann Arbor’s industry. Fires in 1904 and 1913 hurt the river mills, and by the 1920’s they had disappeared, the milling industry moving to the west where more wheat was grown. Allen’s Creek became less important as a source of water supply and

disposal after 1885 when the Ann Arbor Water Works Company was set up, followed by the sanitary sewage system in 1893. In 1926, Allen's Creek was put in a pipe underground to mitigate the flooding problem which arose every spring.

Today, the Huron River is still used as a source for drinking water and for water disposal. But it also continued to provide, in a timeless fashion, the beauty that appealed to Allen and Rumsey. Now that the water is not needed as a source of power, the banks can be returned to recreational use. Island Drive, developed in the 1890's, was Ann Arbor's first serious water park. Residents would drive out in their horse and buggies and spend the day there. Today, Island Drive has been followed by a whole string of parks along the river including Barton, Argo, Bird Hills, the Arboretum, Full, Riverside, Furstenberg, Gallup, and Parker Mill. Canoes can be rented at Argo and Gallup.

The newest park area to be developed is Bandermer, on the stretch of river along Main Street, north of the downtown area, which was given up to industry for many years. The Ann Arbor Parks and Recreation Department buys land on the river whenever they can, planning to some day have a trail system that would follow the Huron River all through town. When this happens, Residents will be able to walk along the river, just as Allen and Rumsey once did.

“water was clear as crystal, well stocked with fine fish, and good resort for deer. There was a large Indian planting ground, rows of corn. On the banks of the Huron River was an Indian cemetery, many braves and one chief buried there. Nearby is the Detroit Indian Trail, about 20 inches wide, and sometimes as deep as a ponies [sic] knees, on the south side of the river, until it reached a ford about two miles east of Ann Arbor, where it crossed over to the north bank to Detroit”.

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