

The Damned Huron

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Caleb Marsh came to the area that would become Belleville in 1826 and took up 137 acres from the United States Government, John Quincy Adams, President. Marsh built the first dam on the Huron River in this area just off the end of what is now Church Street in Belleville for the purpose of producing power for a saw mill. He constructed a mill race along the bank which brought the water downstream to just beyond what is now called Denton Road (it was Cemetery Road then) where the mill was built.

By 1835 Marsh had had enough of the milling business and sold the whole works to John Bell Graham for \$547. Graham sold it six years later to James Bell for \$10,000, making a handsome profit.

James Bell built a flouring mill on the left side of Denton Road as you leave town beside the mill race. This mill became known as the Old Red Mill. Bell had built the mill in 1837 even before he owned the land.

(Photo)

Belleville's Old Red Mill 1837-1899

James Bell convinced his brother William Bell to come to Belleville and open a general store. William became the first post master in Belleville in 1845.

The Old Red Mill and the long-and-earth dam served well for nearly sixty years. In 1899 they were torn down after they had been abandoned for some years.

A new dam was built in 1900 across the Huron where it passed through the Denton Road causeway, about 300 yards from where the first dam had been. James Coomer not only built the dam but also a flouring mill nearby. The dam created a pond on the Huron covering 25 acres and was said to supply four hundred horse power. Coomer's luck ran out in 1911 when the mill burned. The mill passed through several owners and may not have been Coomer's at the time of the fire. A grist mill was built in its place but another fire soon took it out. Then in 1915 a spring freshet destroyed the dam.

(Photo)

James Coomer's dam at the Denton Road bridge (1900) washed out in 1915

By the 1920's Detroit Edison was working on the possibility of building a major dam to develop electrical energy. French Landing, a few miles east of Belleville, was selected to build the concrete dam. Surveys

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indicated that it would create a lake six miles long. It would extend from Rawsonville Road on its west end to the Haggery Road crossing on the east end where the dam would be located.

This would require the purchase by Edison of all the bottom land in the Huron Valley, not easily done but accomplished.

Two more problems became apparent. Denton Road causeway and its bridge would be under water. The Old North Bridge that connected Belleville to Belleville Road would also be under water. A totally new causeway with a new bridge would be built for the Belleville Road connection, the Denton causeway would be built up to above the anticipated water level and the old bridge would be disassembled and used again on the higher causeway.

In 1925 the causeways, bridges, and the dam had been completed and the filling of the lake had begun. Edison would begin generating power May 1, 1925. However fate stepped in and on Monday, April 13, 1925 ten thousand cubic feet of the earthwork portion of the dam gave way “with a roar that could be heard for miles” so stated the newspaper. Property down river suffered much damage but no lives were lost.

(Photo)

Edison dam breached on Monday April 13, 1925 and six miles along Belleville Lake went down the Huron

The winter had been unusually severe and great frozen chunks of lake bottom had been used to construct the earthen portion of the dam. When the frost went out the dike could not hold the pressure and the dam was breached.

Repair began at once and the earthen dike was reinforced with considerable amount of broken concrete. By September of the same year the lake had been filled again and power generation was started.

By the 1960's Edison felt the generators were obsolete and “gave” the lake and dam to Van Buren Township for one dollar. Shortly afterward inspection of the dam determined that it had eroded and was in danger of collapse. The problem was whether to fix it involving millions, or remove it and sell the real estate that would be exposed. The dam was reinforced by actually building a second structure against the face of the old dam. The generating machinery was replaced and power is once again flowing from the power house under operation with a company with experience in power generation. Now it provides a sizeable income for the township.