

A History of the Huron River in Ann Arbor

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Transportation

Before white settlement in this section of Michigan, the Indians used the Huron for east-west travel. They canoed up to the headwaters of the Huron, portaged to the headwaters of the Grand River, and followed that stream west to Lake Michigan. In 1608 LaSalle, copying the Indians' canoe transportation, travelled east on the Huron on his return trip to Quebec. His is thought to be the first boat built by Europeans in Washtenaw County.

The heavier, clumsier, flat-bottomed boats of from 5-10 tons used by the white settlers of Washtenaw County to carry furniture, provisions and product could not navigate the Huron above Snow's Landing (present day Rawsonville). Beyond that point all goods and people had to use roads renowned for their seasonal failing. Winstead Stevens recounts a story: "Andrew Nowland claimed that he had plunged into the ooze with his team west of Ten Eyck's tavern (now Dearborn), and did not see his horses or wagon load of provisions again until they reached the bank of the river at Swartzburg Plains, where he noticed the tops of their ears coming up out of the mud."

Difficulties with overland transportation led the citizens of Ypsilanti to try river travel again. In 1833 a boat was built in Ypsilanti and navigated between there and Detroit until it was wrecked in December of 1834 while carrying a load of bricks. Construction of the Michigan Central Railroad along the south shore of the river met the area's need for transportation and brought to a halt any efforts to render the Huron more navigable. While the river itself had proved too shallow for river-borne transport the river corridors did provide a graded site for railroad bed construction that was utilized by the Michigan Central. The Michigan Central reached Ypsilanti in 1837 and Ann Arbor in 1839, providing fast, efficient transportation to Detroit.

The Mill Era

The Huron River, which drops 200 feet from Portage Lake to Rawsonville and 42 feet within the city of Ann Arbor, was particularly useful as a source of water power that early settlers were quick to take advantage of. Allen's Creek and Traver Creek were also utilized as power sources. The early mills primarily served the agricultural interests of the town, providing processing services for farm products and materials for the growing community. Within the first five years of settlement the following mills were built.

- ◆ In the summer of 1824, Robert Fleming built a sawmill on Sec. 25 (N. of Huron River at Gettysburg). Today this is just east of the intersection of Dixboro and Geddes Roads.
- ◆ In 1825 Andrew Newland built Ann Arbor's first saw mill at the north end of N. State Street. The race for this mill was on the south side of the river and must have come from the Allen's Creek race.
- ◆ In August of 1826, George W. Noyes built a grist mill on N. Main Street, run by water from Allen's Creek.
- ◆ During 1829-30, Anson Brown built the flouring mill of Swift and Co. and the dam and race at Argo to power it.

By 1854 Ann Arbor was a town of 4,500 inhabitants. There were no more sawmills along the local river bank but a foundry (Huron St. at Allen's Creek), Lund Paper Mill (Broadway on Huron river) and a woolen mill (Broadway on Huron River) had joined two flouring mills (at Main st. on Allen's Creek and Sinclair's at Broadway on the Huron). Much of the forests of the surrounding area had been cleared and now the need was to mill the grain from agricultural fields and process wool from the sheep that Washtenaw County was producing in increasing abundance.

Electricity

Waterpower was first tapped for electricity on the Huron at the Geddes Power Plant of the Washtenaw Light and Power Company about the year 1884.

In 1905 the Detroit Edison Company began purchasing the water rights, flowage rights and land use for the construction of their proposed dams along the Huron River. Land, rights and power plants were purchased at Geddes, Argo, Osborne, Delhi, Barton, Fosters, Superior, Ypsilanti, Dexter and Belleville by the year 1908. In 1912 Barton Dam construction was started. It was the only "high wall" dam on the river at the time, with a head of 25 feet. Argo Dam was rebuilt in 1913 to increase its head from 8 feet to 14 feet. By 1925 the Edison Company had power plants at Barton, Argo, Superior (built in 1914 and again in 1918), Geddes or Dixboro (built in 1916) and French Landing further downstream (built 1925). Water rights to three more dams were never developed.

The entire program of the river contemplated nine plants that would have had a total of 225 feet of head and produced 45 million kilowatt hours annually. Several factors had changed between 1912 and 1925 to cause the abandonment of the original concept:

- ◆ construction costs had gone up by 250% and steam-generated electricity had become economically competitive,
- ◆ regional population growth rendered the water-produced electricity insignificant,
- ◆ water flow in the Huron River had been altered by clearing and drainage of the land so as to accentuate a flood-low flow type of river (i.e. under natural conditions of forestation rainfall is absorbed by the soil and drains gradually into river systems. When the forest was cleared in the Huron drainage basin, rain and melting snow drained into the river more rapidly, creating a fixed situation that could not be retained by the dams. Therefore the water had to be released and could not be used for power production. Rapid seasonal drain-off also meant that less water flowed during dryer seasons.),
- ◆ land development in the regions around Portage Lake precluded water storage in that area.

The use of the Huron River for hydroelectric power production has had long term implications that affect land use today. Because the Edison Company constructed dams that changed the water levels of the river, the company required ownership of water rights of all land abutting the river affected by the water level changes. In some cases, such as at Barton this necessitated the purchase of large land tracts not directly utilized in the production of electricity. A subsidiary company, Huron Valley Farms, was incorporated and a graduate of Cornell Agricultural College was hired to develop the land to advantage. Huron Valley Farms was responsible for the development of Barton Hills as a residential area, the extensive planting of pines near Barton, the running of a model dairy producing certified milk (to demonstrate the multiple uses

of electricity), the planting of a peach orchard at Dexter, and a cherry orchard along Huron River Drive. Another project was the conversion of a farmhouse into a rest home for “Detroit Edison Girls” known as Vivienne Farms. A rebuilt version of Vivienne farms currently serves as a meeting place for Detroit Edison officials. The extensive, largely undeveloped land holdings were still held by Detroit Edison in 1959, when hydroelectric power production on the Huron River was deemed no longer profitable.

Parks

The first meeting of the Parks Commission was held in 1905 and Ann Arbor’s park system was initiated shortly thereafter with three tracts along the river: Island Park, Riverside Park and Glens (part of today’s arboretum). An early goal was to make a park along the Huron from Ypsilanti through Ann Arbor and up to the summer resorts up stream. A 1914 newspaper report mentions a “boulevard system” incorporating, in part, Cedar Bend Boulevard, which was to have encircled the city.

Through the early 20th century much interest was exhibited in the establishment of a park system, and, prior to 1920, Fredrick Law Olmsted visited the city and was engaged to formulate a Plan for Ann Arbor. The Plan, submitted in June 1920, show parallels with the Olmsted Plan for Boston and its extended park system along the city’s Charles River. The Olmsted Ann Arbor Plan shows a series of parks and parkway extending along the river and then south from Barton Pond around the western edge of the city. The Mayor’s message to City Council on May 4, 1925 urges voter acceptance of a proposed purchase “in accord with the City Plant prepared by Olmsted Brothers of Brookline, Mass. To link Glen Drive, “The Island” and Riverside Park and give the city control of large river frontage from Geddes to Broadway”.

The writte portion of the Olmsted Plan has been lost for several years and only the one map remains (in the Bentley Historical Collection’s Map File). It would be interesting to see how the current riverfront recreation plan compares with the Olmsted treatment.

In 1959 the Detroit Edison Company approached the City of Ann Arbor with an offer to sell it holdings of over 950 acres which constituted major portions of the Huron River in the Ann Arbor area. Included in the property was the original bed of the river, four ponds created by the dams and extensive holdings above the high water mark along the river. The lands stretched more than five miles beyond the city limits and included large tracts of undeveloped open space lands inside city limits. After four years of negotiation, On September 27, 1963, the city agreed to pay \$400,000 over a five year period to Detroit Edison for all the properties involved. The purchase of the Huron River tripled the land owned by the city for park and recreation purposes.